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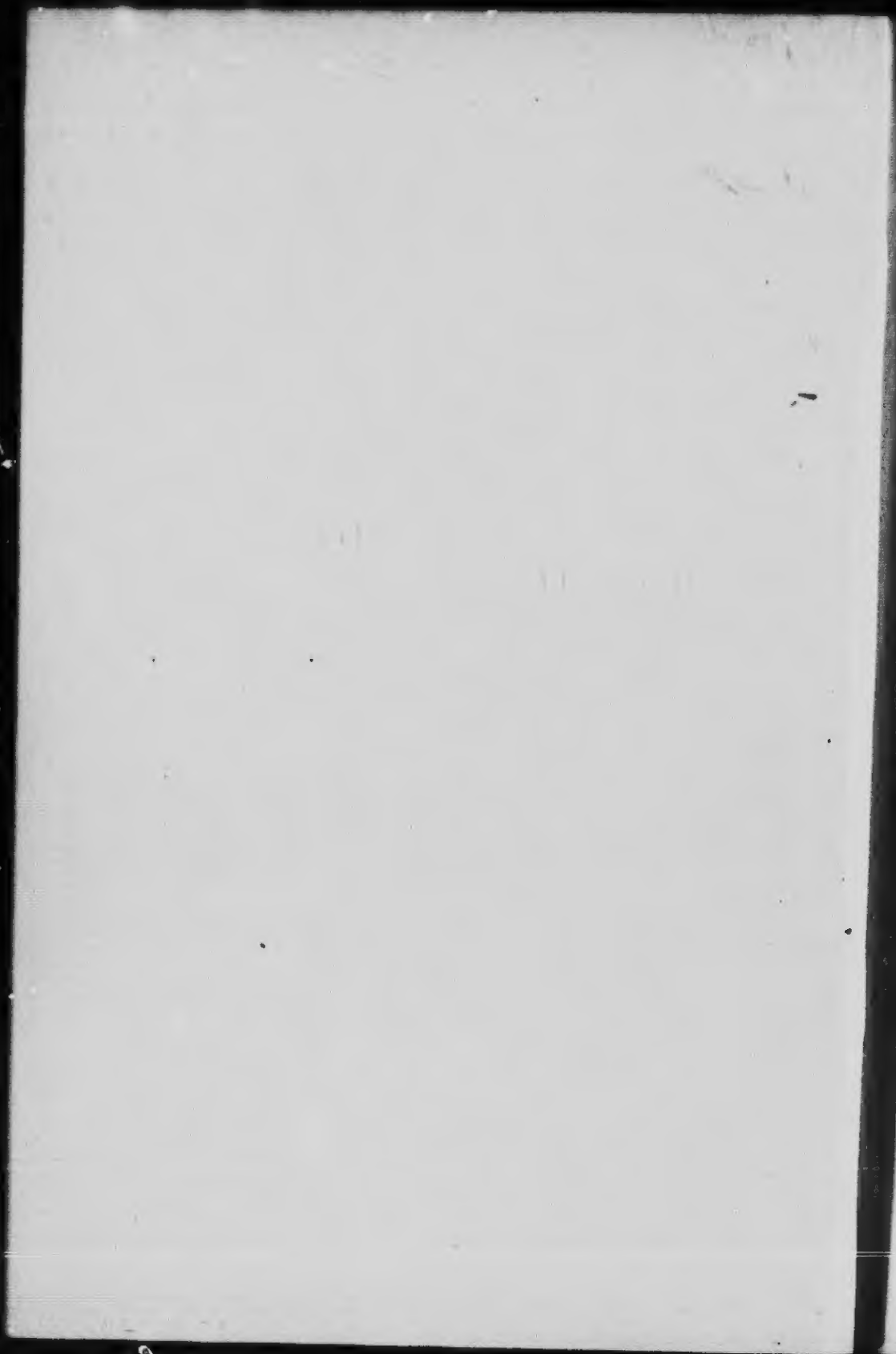
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THE SPANISH DOWRY



The Spanish Dowry

A Romance

BY

L. DOUGALL

AUTHOR OF

"BEGGARS ALL," "THE ZEPHYRIST," "THE MADONNA OF A DAY," ETC.

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THE SPANISH DOWRY

CHAPTER I

IMPORTANT OR UNIMPORTANT?

My uncle and I were both unfortunate—at least, that was certainly the current opinion with regard to us; and there must be more or less truth in the opinion held by one's neighbours. Our misfortunes differed greatly in character, and, like the king in the Wonderland court, I have never been at all sure whether the word to be applied to them was "important" or "unimportant," or, indeed, whether we were fortunate or unfortunate. Most people consider that whether a man can walk or not, and whether a man is married or not, are matters of great importance, at least to the man himself; but I don't think these questions really entered deeply into our life in our lonely house on the Dorset sand-dunes.

My uncle had married, and, under curious circumstances, separated from his wife. It was not very long after this that I came to live with him at Lone End; and I was lame.

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As a child I had lived at home in a northern town, where it seemed to me that my father worked very hard, and did not make enough money to pay for my mother's frocks—at least, I used to hear something like that when my maternal grandmother came to see us. My father and I liked each other very much indeed; my sisters were at school; I never saw much of my mother, and I hated my grandmother.

My "misfortune" came about when I was still a little chap. My father and I were both in a railway accident; he was but slightly hurt, and was taken home to recover; I, with one leg hopelessly injured, was taken to a hospital to lie long in pain. But it was my father who died and I who recovered. He had been dead for some months before they thought fit to tell me, and by that time our relatives had made a division of the family. My mother, with my sisters, went back to her parents' house, and my father's brother offered to adopt me.

One day, in the hospital, the nurses put me in a little white room off the big ward where I had hitherto been. They told me that I was going home. I had been up and about the ward in the afternoons for two or three days, learning to hop on my new crutch; and everybody had so praised my agility and admired my new crutch and new clothes that I felt very fine and perfectly happy. I fell asleep that day in the little white room, and next hearing my grandmother's hated voice, I lay still. I always kept as still as possible when with her, in order not to attract her notice.

"He is the boy's natural guardian," my grandmother was repeating in low, emphatic tones. "So that I cannot see that it is at all necessary to explain his enfeebled condition in writing. He might object, whereas he has no right whatever to make any objection."

The last words were said, I knew, while my grandmother's teeth were held firmly and rather close together; the words just came through with a subdued and unrelenting vehemence which always terrified me, although I had seldom any concern in matters that she talked of thus.

She went on: "I have insisted upon entire adoption. Less would not be just to my dear husband; he has taken the two girls and the mother—more than I ought to have asked him to do, but I always prefer to err on the side of generosity."

Another woman's voice said: "If you had informed me more clearly as to the circumstances—"

"Oh, yes; of course I understand you perfectly, Prince. You think that the other woman may die, and that you may have a chance to marry your master yet."

"Heaven forbid!" said the other piously. "I am glad to say that Mr. Ferguson, as is but natural, confides in me entirely. I have mentioned to you before that he talks over everything with me. I would not be a party to deceiving him."

"Oh indeed," sneered my grandmother. "Since he confides, perhaps you will tell us, then, why his wife left him, and where she is."

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"He sent her away," said the other voice; "that I will affirm, but nothing more."

I was convinced that this stranger who was speaking made a prancing gesture with her head as she spoke, and sat erect with a great appearance of dignity. My grandmother, to give her full benefit of the truth, never needed to affect any external dignity, she had it by nature. She replied now, in a casual way, more offensive than earnest contradiction:

"You won't tell because you don't know; so we need not discuss that further. As to the information I gave about the boy when I wrote, I gave all I had, and could have given no more. My husband and daughter had not thought fit to disclose the imperfect recovery to me; they were afraid, after all that had passed, that I could not bear more. For my own part, I think truth is better than falsehood; but the result of their reticence and my weak health was that when I asked that you should be sent at once for the boy, I was not aware that complete recovery was impossible."

"I quite understand that you wish me to tell Mr. Ferguson that you did not know he was lame."

"You may say to your master precisely what you think advisable. I shall write to him. You would hardly have your present situation if my opinion were not of weight."

My own name was Ferguson, so I supposed at first that these women were talking about my father; and afterwards it seemed to me that they were part of a sort of fairy tale, for their words seemed fantastic,

and to be the opening of something, the continuance of which I could not even imagine.

"Mr. Ferguson does not want a sickly child," said the other. "He is a young man yet; if he adopts a boy he naturally wants one with a future before him. This boy has no future; it would be ridiculous to think of such a thing."

I opened my eyes and stared at her. She had given the word "this" such a hissing emphasis that for the first time it occurred to me that it was I of whom she spoke.

"I have a future," I said; and I raised myself on my elbow and looked at her.

The prancing movement of her head was just what I had seemed to see with my eyes shut. She had a clear, white skin, blue eyes, a long nose, and a high forehead.

My grandmother remarked in a perfectly audible undertone:

"He has always been sly and peculiar; and of course recent events, and being humoured in his illness, have increased the defects."

Both women sat and looked at me, not in the least interested in my awakening or in my protest, but as if they were arranging a plan of action with regard to me.

I had been dressed to drive home, and I began to get off the bed now, and to pull my crutch toward me. I was determined that I would not lie there to be inspected. I would complain to my father; I would tell him all that they had been saying, for I was sure there was something wrong about it.

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"Lie still, Alexis," said my grandmother imperiously.

I defied her as I had never done before.

"I am going to my father!" I cried. "I shall tell him all you have said."

At this my grandmother put her handkerchief before her eyes and gave a low shriek. The other woman got up and barred my way to the door. She looked me all over.

"I really cannot take such a responsibility," she said, in natural tones; and then to me, stiffly enough: "My dear Alexis, nobody is going to hurt you. Your grandmother and I have no intention but perfect kindness."

"*Master* Alexis," corrected my grandmother.

"Certainly not!" said the stranger, tossing her head. "I should not think of it."

I had never before agreed with my grandmother about anything—never felt that I was on her side in any difference—but now I blessed her in my heart, and was perfectly determined that the stranger should address me as "*Master*," but I knew—it is extraordinary how far children see into the minds of their elders—I knew that if I agreed with my grandmother openly she would change her mind. As it was, she merely repeated, in a casual tone, but with hauteur:

"*Master* Alexis."

"There are limits to my good-nature," said the other.

"That, of course," said my grandmother; "but not to your desire to keep your present situation."

"It is not in your power to affect that. I think I should be wiser to return without him, and better for Alexis too. Mr. Ferguson would certainly insist upon discipline. He would not allow any boy to say 'I won't' and 'I will.'" She said this looking at me in a threatening way. "Mr. Ferguson would soon bring him to order if I took him; but it seems to me it would be better for him to come here first and"—she hesitated—"and decide for himself."

When she had said these things, breathing her threats partly at my grandmother and partly at me, she added, in very precise and exalted tones: "Alexis, sit down!"

"It is my wish," remarked my grandmother, "that you should call him 'Master Alexis!' He is your master's adopted son," she added after a moment, "and heir."

"Heir," repeated the other, in a tone that affected to be amused.

Although I had always hated my grandmother, I was not going to see her sneered at by a stranger, so I said again: "I shall tell the nurses to call a cab. I am going to my father; I shall tell him all you have said."

At this my grandmother rose, again held her handkerchief to her eyes, moaned aloud, and said that, after recent events, this was really more than she could bear.

Two of my nurses came. I think that perhaps it was I who had had more than I could bear. I think, looking back, that it must have been I who fainted, and not my grandmother. I remember that my

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nurses lifted me between them, and after that I was left quiet. Then one of the surgeons came—a young doctor who had taught me to play chess—and it was he who told me that my father was dead, that my mother having been ill, had already gone to a distant place with my sisters, and that I was going to take a journey to live with a very kind uncle who had adopted me.

"He is not at all kind," I said.

This discussion about my uncle came, I think, about an hour after I had heard of my father's death, for I remember that it had been a long time before I could understand that. The man who had told me had been very patient, going away several times into the ward, and coming back to answer the questions I had thought of in the meantime. I believed all that he told me except this about my uncle; at that point what I had heard in the morning came back to me.

"He is not at all kind," I said. "He is a person who believes in strictness, and can't bear boys to say things as my father could; and will hate me because I am a cripple."

If I believed all this then, by next day I believed it with tenfold intensity, when, wretched as I was, I had started on my journey with Mrs. Prince.

I could only go a short distance at a time, and we consequently spent two nights on the road at hotels. All the way I defied Mrs. Prince in every way that it was possible to defy her without being ungentlemanly. I had a great idea, won I know not where, that respect and affection for my father could best

be shown by a display of good 'ceding. Perhaps the young surgeon had suggested this, thinking that I might have need of such armour against my fate, but the application was left to my ignorant mind and defiant heart to work out; and God knows that my dear father himself must have laughed aloud if he was permitted to see the starched elegance of my beha-

All the way, Mrs. Prince appeared also to be exercising some self-control. I had overheard the young surgeon say something to her; I was grimly amused to think that he might have warned her that I would faint away again if she were at all unkind. I had not the least fear, or intention, of fainting; but I enjoyed the belief that she was afraid of it. Certainly, no one could say that she was unkind. She offered me a cup of milk and a sandwich almost every half hour—offers which I invariably refused with elaborate thanks. She gave every guard a half-crown, for which fee he lifted me into the carriage and allowed me to lie down at full length. I always took care to thank each railway guard and to order him about in a lordly way, for fear she might suppose I thought the tips she bestowed came out of her own purse. At the hotels, the meals she ordered were of the best; and I, too sad and frightened of the future to feel any appetite, perpetually annoyed her by pressing all the dishes upon her again and again, making it clear that I knew Mr. Ferguson paid for them and that I was a Ferguson. Also whenever I spoke to her, I always said: "If you please," and "I beg your

pardon," or "If you will be so good, Mrs. Prince," in the casual tone of authority I had learned in mimicking grandmother. I lay looking at her whenever I had nothing else to do, because I knew that when I did not lazily, yet attentively, gaze upon her face, she was looking at me with the curious, critical eye of an inspector. I was conscious of being the cleverer of the two at acting, for when she said: "Alexis, do not stare; it is not good for invalids to fix their eyes upon any one object," I knew that she had not dared to say: "It is rude to stare," simply because there was a certain languor as of an absent mind thrown into my glance which made it impossible for her to be sure that I was aware of what I was looking at; whereas when I said, with the querulousness of a sick child: "If you will be so very kind, Mrs. Prince, as to read your book, or look out of the window, and stop counting the buttons on my jacket or the hairs on my head, I think I could rest better," she was not in the least able to pretend that she had not been staring; nor could she take refuge in silence, but was forced to say: "Alexis, when you reach your uncle's house you will find he is a very different person from anyone who has hitherto had charge of you. It is only kind of me to warn you that he will not permit fretful behaviour or those habits which you have acquired in the indulgence of a sick-room."

I usually affected to have gone to sleep, or to be thinking of something else, before she could entirely finish her threats or warnings; but, after all, though

I was a more cruel and deliberate tormentor than she, she had her full revenge, for there was growing in my heart an abject terror of this uncle, who, until I was of age, would have me in his power. My nerves were all a-tremble; my head ached, and my back ached; and since the morning, only three days before, when I had first learned of my father's death, I had realised every hour more keenly the misery of my lot. It was only by tormenting Mrs. Prince and exercising myself in the fine arts of pride and elegance that I could endure.

CHAPTER II

THE COMING OF THE HEIR

DURING this sad journey my mind went over and over what I had heard of the conversation between Mrs. Prince and my grandmother by my bed in the hospital. Had their dialogue been written and given to me to learn by rote, I should not have remembered a word of it. When the world is more advanced, people will no doubt repeat, in mysterious voice, declensions, irregular verbs and choice passages from the classics, when their children are recovering from fevers or waking from sleep or eavesdropping; in that way even Englishmen might become proficient in languages, dead or alive.

The conversation, of which I had understood nothing at first, was full of suggestion. Every time I conned it I learned more of what it meant, more of what it might mean, and elaborated upon that much that I only half knew to be pure imagination. I was not given to constructing gay castles in the air; my fancy—to continue the figure—was more frequently employed in digging gloomy cellars or making underground passages. Before me I saw the blank certainty of joylessness; I

therefore determined to fight as gallantly as I could against the sure tyranny of Fate and of my fellow-beings.

I fixed my mind first upon the railway station, at which Mrs. Prince had many times assured me my uncle would meet her and drive her home. I had been thrust upon this uncle as a beggar; he did not know that I was a cripple; it was well, then, that we should meet before I left the road into the outer world. I would say to him, there and then, upon the station platform: "You see what I am: I would prefer that you should give me a ticket, and I will take the next train to the nearest workhouse or orphan asylum." I intended to say this with cheerful dignity, and to assure him, if he hesitated, that I had always particularly desired to live in a workhouse, that I felt it would be a more sociable abode than his, and that, as I was determined to earn my own living, I thought the parish authorities would probably put me in the way of doing so more quickly than any schoolmaster who held with the teaching of Greek and Latin. I rehearsed this scene till my own part was perfect, and felt that at least it could never be said that I had entered any man's house upon false pretence.

I have always held that the sixth sense is the sense of probability, one which many persons are entirely without. I cherish it as one of the talents that have come to me from my father. By this sense I divined that an uncle of mine would not at first accept my offer; it was more likely that we should come to a compromise. He would, for

appearance' sake, coldly admit me as a member of his household for a time, unless he could decide upon the cheapest and least disgraceful way of getting rid of me; and my heart was fixed upon battle during this temporary sojourn. I would test his regard for one of his own name and blood, test also his degree of servitude to this ridiculous Prince with the prancing head, by demanding that he should make the woman call me "Mr. Alexis."

- He was, no doubt, hand-in-glove with the creature, and as I would never waive my right in the matter, it would be war to the knife.

In the afternoon of the second day, our journey by train ended. I was racked with pain, and exhausted with fatigue; yet I held my lance ready and felt my pride, like a charger pawing the ground in eagerness for war. When the train drew into the station, there was no uncle, no carriage, waiting for us. My offence at being obliged to lie full length upon cushions in the bottom of the carrier's cart was so great, that I could not even take much delight in the mortification of Mrs. Prince, who must mount the front seat with two labourers' wives, and be trundled the length of the countryside as though she were an ordinary person and not the friend and confidante of Mr. Ferguson, of Lone End. In two days of travel I had learned what she considered the strong points of her position, and could taste her present bitterness.

As we jogged along I could see nothing outside the canvas curtains round me. It was a winter afternoon, and as we neared the coast, we met the

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constant bluster and whistle of the wind, and heard the rise and fall of the waves upon the sand. It seemed to me that we were coming to some land under an evil enchantment. The wind and the waves that I could not see daunted my spirit more than all the severities that Mrs. Prince had declared my uncle would exercise.

The worst things come to an end. When I heard Mrs. Prince, with much precision and delicacy of tone, commanding the carrier to drive in at the front gate, and the old carrier, half deaf, and entirely obstinate, declaring he wouldn't make cart-tracks on the master's gravel, I knew that this stoppage was the end of our journey.

I would not be lifted out; I wriggled to the back, and slid under the buttoned canvas, falling upon sand; but my crutch fell with me. I was up in a moment, and found myself facing a door in a brick wall and surrounded by a sea-mist.

I threw myself against the door; I was determined to precede Mrs. Prince in entering. My infirmity would have prevented this had it not been that she was still standing on the other side of the canvas cover, bestowing upon the carrier, in measured tones, unmeasured blame for his insolence. I had just time to hear him asking her to say it all over again, because he could not hear, and to feel a certain thrill of satisfaction in the knowledge that she would do so, before I turned the door-knob, entered and shut it noiselessly. I swung myself along a path that led through the mist between glass houses and rose bushes. I looked up at what, in the mist, seemed

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almost a castle of brick gables and timber eaves; and round to the front I went, where dripping evergreens towered. I was going to rap with importance or ring, but I could not see knocker or door-bell.

The door stood wide open. I was rather pleased with the size and good style of the house. My grandmother had not only implied that I was a beggar, which was obviously true, but had said that I was the heir; and although I could not but perceive that this condition of things might be altered, I tried to stuff myself out with the present fact, as an actor puts pillows under his doublet when he goes to swagger on the stage.

I went into the hall, looking everywhere for a bell. I peeped into a room and saw a beautiful flash and flicker of firelight gild its polished surfaces and glow upon its red covers. There was no one there, and I could hang upon my crutch no longer, so I crawled into an arm-chair all in shadow at the side of the fire, and, looking about me with intense excitement, waited.

CHAPTER III

THE YELLOW MAN

I HAD ample time to get my breath before I heard a man's step on the gravel outside. He entered and shut the front door; he hesitated in the hall; he came into the room and looked round. He had fair hair, and struck me as the sort of man my father and I always thought well of in the story books we read together. My father and I had both dark hair, and my grandmother always spoke of my dark complexion as a Ferguson peculiarity; so I was sure the incomer was not the uncle. I thought him rather like Ferdinand in "The Tempest," no doubt because the sea and the wind reminded me of that story. He also reminded me of King Lear, whom I liked in spite of his folly; and I also thought him a little like Mr. Birchell; or he might have stood— But while I was thinking of these things he went out again without having seen me, and I was left wondering whether he was a burglar or a visitor. He had had a large felt hat in his hand, so I hoped that he was a neighbour. Such a neighbour might help to bring my enemies to reason.

In a few minutes I heard Mrs. Prince and the

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carrier and another man enter the hall by a back door. They were all talking.

"You ought to have come by the train you mentioned in your letter," said voice number three, "then you wouldn't have needed to take the cart."

Voice number three was affable, but firm in the maintenance of this opinion, which he repeated more than once in the next few minutes. No doubt it was the voice of my uncle; he was regretting his housekeeper's discomfort.

The carrier was saying that it had never happened to him before, in thirty year, to lose a bundle, let alone a passenger. Once he had lost a cat; it had scabbled its way out of a basket; and once he had lost a pig, because it bit his hand, and he wasn't going to carry no biting pigs, so he let it go; but this thing hadn't happened to him before, and the lady needn't say it was his fault, for he hadn't been put in solemn charge of any young gentleman.

I perceived that they had lost me, and I listened with great interest to hear how Mrs. Prince would describe my behaviour, and how my uncle would take the loss.

Mrs. Prince seemed, indeed, for the moment unprepared to speak, but the affable voice which had gently reproved her for coming by an unexpected train now said that the youngster had no doubt got out of the cart of his own accord, and thought it a fine opportunity to see a little of the world for himself; a country walk would do him no harm, and if he

didn't turn up by next day, it would be quite easy to find him. From this I perceived that no report of my misfortune had preceded me.

"You don't understand," I heard Mrs. Prince wail. "He'll 'ave fainted. Is the traction engine anywhere about? Is Captain Barker out with his horses?"

Voice number three answered in a tone of reproachful kindness, "When you come to talk about traction engines, Mrs. Prince, I certainly don't understand. You are overcome by distress—you are. It's a cup of tea you want. I tell you the youngster won't come to any harm."

"The traction engine's on the North Hay Road," said the carrier grimly. "'Tain't likely they'll bring it down this way; but they might; there's no saying what they might do."

Mrs. Prince appeared to be invoking the higher powers. "Heavens!" she seemed to cry. "Oh, heavens!"

"There's nought for it but to go back," said the carrier. "But I ain't going unless you two come along. I never was put in charge of the young gent—as pretty a young gent as ever I seed. I take that sort of charge as solemn, I do; but I'll not take it at all now."

"Our own horses can go back over the road, for the matter of that," said the third voice; "but the youngster is over the fences and miles across country by this time, you may depend."

"The cart would be better," said Mrs. Prince; "he could be laid down in it."

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I heard the step of the fair-haired man upon the gravel again, and again he came in at the front door. He stopped in the hall, and said :

"Oh, Mrs. Prince, have you got back?"

With but a feeble effort at her former prancing, Mrs. Prince told that the young gentleman, who was still much of an invalid, had apparently fallen out of the cart by the way. She thought it would be better to go back at once to look for him, and take the cart, lest, being still sickly, he might have been hurt by the fall and require to lie upon the cushions.

"It's a hambulance, sir, that she wants to make of me," explained the carrier.

"It's certainly no fault of yours, Mrs. Prince," said voice number three. "No one can blame you ; but if you are intent on returning, I will go with you. We'll put our own horses in the cart, which will be more rapid ; and if he's hurt and on the road, we'll find him in a trice."

At this they all began to talk at once, so that I could not distinguish what was said, except that I heard the light-haired man in peremptory tones order his own horse to be saddled at once. Whether he wanted to join in hunting for me I could not tell.

I was intensely disgusted with the person who seemed to be my uncle. I said to myself that, whatever his name and fortune, he was a common fellow thus meanly to stand and flatter his house-keeper, and made no strict inquiry at all about me.

They went again through a door by which they had come. I could just hear them talking in another

part of the house. Then they seemed to go out of it, and all was silent.

I hated them so much that I never thought of declaring myself. I was most eager, until my conscience began to prick me, that they should spend an hour or two hunting the high road in darkness and storm.

The light-haired man came back again, and into the room, and stood waiting in the glare of the firelight; and I held my breath lest he should see me sitting there in the shadow. But immediately he did see me, came near, bent forward, and nodded to me with a twinkle in his eye.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said I, "but are you a burglar or a friend of the house?"

He had a face of pleasing gravity. It gave me the impression that there was a smile somewhere behind his yellow moustache.

"I think I might be called a friend of the house," he said.

He went away and brought in a large lamp, taking the shade and chimney off on the table. But before he had struck a light I heard a groom come running with a restless horse upon the gravel outside. The yellow man opened the window.

"I have changed my mind, Hudson," he said. "I won't have the horse now."

I knew exactly what the man with the horse looked like, for I had observed that all grooms look alike. He did not move away at once, and then he remarked, with an exuberance of interest that he evidently could not restrain:

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"I never saw Mrs. Prince so low, sir—not in my time. She's that taken down she's hardly a word to say. She's scared—that's what she is."

"Why is she so much alarmed?" asked the yellow man.

"That's just what I was wondering if you knew, sir, when you said you'd bide in. It was the carrier that told me. He came up when I was putting in the mare, pretending to help me, and he said that the young gentleman had only the use of one leg, and looked more like death than life when he came out of the train. Did you know, sir, as he couldn't walk by himself?"

The yellow man stood as still as if he had been turned into stone. Then he gave a hasty glance back towards me, but the shadows in my corner had deepened. He said to the groom:

"Never mind that, Hudson; the young gentleman is here all right. Could you come in and make tea for us, as they have gone?"

"I might, sir, if you'll secure me afterwards from her."

"Oh yes, I'll take all the blame on myself," said the yellow man, and he shut down the window with impatience.

He came towards me. "Did you fall from the cart?" he asked.

"I didn't fall. I only came round by the front door while that Prince person was lecturing. I'm glad the groom doesn't like her; and it's quite true what he said, that I'm a cripple. I'm both a beggar and a cripple; and my grandmother has tried to

foist me on my uncle without his knowing this. I would be sorry for him if he were a gentleman, but he isn't."

The yellow man stood before me. The firelight played on him while I peered at him out of the shadow. There was in the attitude of his head and shoulders such an appearance of sorrow that I forgot for a few moments what seemed to me the mighty importance of my own affairs. Before I went into the hospital I don't suppose I should have known by the way a man held his shoulders whether he was crying inside or not; but my six months there had made me alive to many things that I found both new and interesting. I remembered my determination always to behave as a gentleman should, so I said:

"I am afraid, sir, you have troubles of your own, in which case I ought not to trouble you with mine."

"I don't know; I should think that was an additional reason for our sympathising with each other."

When he had said this he went on lighting the lamp with abstracted demeanour. Then without more ado, he pushed a large sofa in front of the fire, and lifted me upon it. He opened a box and gave me a biscuit, which he said was a kind that had beef jelly in it, and would be sustaining until tea came.

"It's not a puppy biscuit?" I asked.

"No," said he. "Oh no; it's not a puppy biscuit."

This having been gravely settled, I ate the biscuit,

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and he sat down on a chair sideways to the fire, looking at me.

"Will the groom really make tea?" I asked.

"I hope so."

"How long will they hunt about the roads for me?"

"It's ten miles to the station," he said; "and dark and foggy. It will take them some hours, but the mare needs exercise."

He was surprised into a little sudden laugh here, and I began to laugh, and could not stop myself. If I had stopped I think I should have cried, for I had always been taught that Providence takes care of us only when we are good, and I had clearly been bad; I had my revenge, but I was uneasy.

Until this evening I had always taken God for granted, as my father had seemed to do, and felt that He backed me up, because I always did the best that I could, except in certain rare and special instances of wickedness, of which this was the last and worst. God would not back the wicked, and I began to realise that I had now no father to settle things for me again. There seemed a hopeless distance between me and God. I heard the wind and the sea cry round the isolated house, sounds to which a town boy is little accustomed. They seemed to me symbols of the forces, divine and human, against which I must now stand alone. I felt so helpless and hopeless; so I went on weakly giggling like a girl while I ate my biscuit.

I think he wanted to recall me to self-control; he asked casually:

"Why did you say he was not a gentleman?"

"Because he is not. I heard him talking to that woman in the hall; he had a very mean and mealy way of speaking to her. I am sorry to say this of my uncle, but it is true; and having said it to a stranger, I shall feel it only honourable to say it to him when I have a chance."

I drew in my breath, realising suddenly what terror the fulfilment of this vaunt would cost me.

"What could you have heard him say?" he asked, in slow surprise.

"The only reason he gave for wiggling her for taking the wrong train—a slow train, which made me, his nephew and heir, horribly tired—was that he had missed the pleasure of driving her from the station; and he said that she was not to blame if I had fallen out and been killed. He tried to comfort her when he should have dismissed her for forgetting all about me the whole way from the station. Before you came in the second time he kept saying, 'You have nothing to blame yourself about, Mrs. Prince.' Over and over again he said it, in an adoring manner."

"Was she very high and mighty with him?" asked the yellow man, with obvious interest.

"No," said I. "She only kept saying, 'Oh, heavens!' which I suppose he considered showed her piety."

I felt better for my biscuit by this time, and I always loved telling a story, so I sat a little more upright, and experienced no further temptation to giggle.

But the yellow man did. He began to laugh, and laughed, not loudly but with irrepressible amusement,

till the groom came in, walking on tiptoe, and put a boiling kettle on the hob very awkwardly, but the tray he brought was amply provided, and looked very appetising.

"No jam, Hudson?" said the yellow man.

"I durstn't go to the cupboard in her room, sir."

"Then I will."

And he got up and went out of the room with a great appearance of courage; and the groom stood with his knees a little bent, looking at him with entranced admiration, as at the paces of a thoroughbred.

"It's blue blood that does it, sir," he said confidentially to me. "It's nought but high breeding that could withstand that Mrs. Prince, sir."

I was delighted with him because he called me "sir," and regarded Mrs. Prince as I did; but just to show that it was beneath my dignity to discuss my uncle's friend with a groom, I asked in an easy, masterly way:

"How many horses do we keep, Hudson?"

The yellow man came back with some very good jam, and we had an excellent tea together, he and I; but nothing could raise my spirits much while my conscience was so deeply stained. He asked, in a very polite and diffident way, several questions about my illness, the nurses and surgeons, especially what the latter had said I ought or ought not to do in the way of exercise while I was getting better. I did not care to talk about these matters, but he had shown himself so very jolly, especially in offering to take the blame of getting the tea off Hudson's

shoulders, that I answered all his inquiries to the best of my ability. But when he pushed the tea-table aside, my conscience became again intolerably loud in its accusations and threats of disaster. I even wished for the return of the search party, and could not refrain from making an uneasy remark to that effect.

"Mrs. Prince had on a very fine bonnet," I said. "I think it was a new one that she meant to charm my uncle with, and I have heard that salt mists are bad for bonnets—"

"She wore the bonnet of her own choice," interrupted the yellow man hastily. "What her motive may have been is not for us to decide. Each of us is responsible only for his own motives."

I replied in a depressed tone :

"I fear that I am responsible for the spoiling of the bonnet. I could have called out and told them I was here."

"You were tired," he said. "You must not think too much of what you did; you were cold and hungry. I think you said just now that she ought to be dismissed for her carelessness; but, short of that, what punishment would you have thought fitting?"

"Well," said I, "I might perhaps think that the long trapse on a stormy evening was very fitting; but, sir, it was not my place to send her. And besides," I added more gloomily, "my uncle may be flirting with her all the time, so that she may not care about her bonnet being spoiled."

"Oh, no," said he hastily; "she has no such

alleviation of her penance as that; nor would she desire it. You have made a mistake about Mrs. Prince in that particular; she has no such ideas about your uncle."

"Are you quite sure?" I said. "I had it from my grandmother."

"Your grandmother was mistaken. I must beg you to put such an idea entirely out of your mind. If there were any foundation for your grandmother's notion, it would still be wrong for you or me to say it. It is a point of honour with men never to say such things about women, and more especially when a woman is placed so that she must defend herself in the world, and earn her own living. If your father were here he would tell you the same. You are only a boy, and so did not know this."

"No; I did not know. I am very glad that you told me." And feeling more at home with him after this explanation, I related the alternative with regard to the poorhouse with which I was going to confront my uncle when he returned, and said that, if he did not agree to that, I should only remain here on condition that Mrs. Prince addressed me respectfully. "That, at least," said I, "is not bad form, I hope."

"No," he said meditatively, looking into the fire. "It may not be quite amiable to be so determined about your own dignity, but under the circumstances, I cannot exactly call it ill-bred." Then in another moment he asked: "Would you like to go to bed?"

There was a difficulty in the way, but I did not know how to explain it to him.

"You see," I began, "I have no doubt that all sorts of evil are going to befall me."

"Indeed! I had hoped after tea you would feel more cheerful. To-morrow morning, after a good sleep—"

I interrupted him.

"I shall not sleep. How can I sleep when I have played a mean trick on my uncle, and given so much trouble to a woman who, after all, has to defend herself in the world?"

"She is quite capable of doing it," he interposed. "I did not intend to make her an object of compassion, but merely to point out—"

"I understand," interposed I darkly; "and you are kind enough to make excuses for me; but I cannot excuse myself."

"That," he said, "is a good reason for sleeping soundly; for when we excuse ourselves, you know the good angels have nothing to do with us; but when we know we are in the wrong and want to do better, we may be sure that the whole universe is on our side."

"Are you quite sure, sir? I always thought it was just the other way."

"If you will think a little while you will see that what I say is true."

So we sat still, and he said several things, and I began to see that he spoke wisely.

As soon as I had got again on the right side of Providence I was ready to go to bed. I did not care at all what my uncle might think of me. When I explained this to the yellow-haired man he laughed,

and took me upstairs to a large room with two beds in it. Mine was a narrow one in a corner. High window curtains made undulating motions in the wind, and the firelight gave them a very nice colour.

"Who is to sleep in that other bed?" I asked.

"Would you have any objection—?" Then he cleared his throat and began again in a somewhat diffident manner: "Would you have any objection to your uncle sleeping there?"

I thought his tone and manner rather lacking in respect. My uncle, whatever he was, ought at least to be master in his own house. I answered with marked decision:

"I should have no right to have any objection to my uncle. I only asked because I should have declined to sleep in the same room as a menial."

The yellow man laughed one of his short, unexpected laughs.

"I don't think, sir," I said, "that I quite understand who you are."

"I only laughed," he said, "because you say such odd things."

In the next few weeks, while I discovered that a man might be fair-haired and yet be a Ferguson, I learnt to see most things in a different light and setting from what they would have had had I remained with my mother's people. My uncle had his own private standard of value, and the relative values of all things altered for me when judged by his standard. For instance, the fact that I was a cripple seemed to have much less importance for him than for other people, and so, because I was

with him, it came to seem unimportant to me. Again, my mother soon after married a very rich man, and my sisters became grand, and fixed in their intention to marry as successfully. By this they all lost interest in his eyes, so that they hardly seemed to belong to us any more.

CHAPTER IV

HELIOS AND THE PEARL MAIDENS

THE yellow man and I were very happy. I must add that I was from the first a very horrid boy—fretful, wildly conceited, and anxious only that the whole world should turn on the pivot of my importance. I have no doubt that my uncle, although a good sort of person when I first knew him, profited by my society to an immeasurable extent. For if there be any truth at all in that which both religion and philosophy teach, that the saints are perfected by the thorns in their path, it goes without saying that the advantage to him of having adopted me was immense. People who came to see us said—it is the objectionable sort of thing that visitors say—what a joy it must be for me to have such a home and such a friend. Unless people are on a very intimate footing, they should never say things that are true; there is always a really splendid selection of untrue remarks to be made. As to the advantage that my uncle was to me, great as it was, it was nothing compared to the excellent bringing up which he received at my hands. For, as far as I can recollect, my leg always ached, and I hid the ache and my peevishness

under a manner of extraordinary hauteur ; and never failed, day or night, to lord it over the servants and lecture my uncle upon all subjects within the range of my universe ; but when I came up a bit I adopted him as a friend under the name of " Helios," because of his yellow hair and his twinkle, and the sort of way he had of producing a basking sensation of soul by his mere presence.

I first actually chummed up with Helios in a matter over which we differed sharply. This was with regard to the colour of the sails on the fishing boats and the colour of the cows that grazed on the grass of the coast. Our front wall was a really fine structure from a builder's point of view. Helios had draped the wall with certain festoons of ivy, which were not unbecoming, but he failed to discover the possibility of the colour effect which one day became clear to my prophetic eye.

Through all the openings of the shrubbery by which we looked from our work-room windows to the sea, the upper part of this wall could be seen, and over it the grass where the cows browsed, and beyond that the merging of the river in the sea where the fishing fleet passed twice a day. Now, although there are no two red sails of quite the same shade, and no red cow the same as another, their varying shades are those of the common wall-flower that grows so easily in broken masonry. How delightful to the eye is such repetition of a colour in different objects ! When I saw the warm sunshine light up the cows and the fishing sails to all glorious hues of brownish red—the cows in green pastures, the sails

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in blue waters—I should have been dull indeed if I had not hastened to enhance the glory of the prospect by producing tufts of the necessary wall-flowers in chinks of the wall. Hudson bought me a mallet and mason's chisel, and I had done a fair amount of work in making very good chinks when Helios observed and interfered. He said—but I will not tell what he said. I would not like anyone to know how long it took me to win him over to my point of view; for Helios—God bless him!—is never really lacking in a sense of beauty, and now that he has become a distinguished writer, at whose name the world curtsies, I would not wish to prejudice his wide reputation. Suffice it to say that before long Helios arranged the wall to suit me by the help of a mason, and the pretty, sprawling plants, self-sown year by year, are luxuriant.

Helios heartily despised idleness in any class of the community; and so, of course, did I, for we never really differed in any essential particular. He did not call it work to do things when one felt inclined, at irregular times; he called that, no matter what was accomplished, idleness, and so did I. But while he always worked regularly and to good purpose, I took days and weeks of wicked idleness.

The work for which I was educated was of a literary nature. It was the sort of thing in which Helios could and did obtain for me regular employment. I was a reader of manuscript for a firm that published boys' story books, and I was a compiler of certain pages of popular science for a boys' magazine.

I was also always writing a novel in a private scribbling book, the plan of which had been changed about a hundred times, when one night, quite unexpectedly, this story began, not in my scribbling book but out of it.

On that night the household at Lone End was just the same as on the night of my arrival, except that we were all years older. Mrs. Prince ruled us with the rod of her own vanities, and these became so insistent when resisted that little short of stern necessity provoked resistance. Evans, the manservant, whose voice that first night I had mistaken for my uncle's, still adored her at a distance; and Hudson, the groom, still detested her at a safer distance. Helios was still his own head-gardener, except that I, having taken to horticulture, insisted upon supremacy in that department. We thought we should have been extremely happy if we had only had delightful women-folk about us; and this sense of lack, though it lent, no doubt, its own enchantment to our actual delights, was our only source of discontent.

The bell of the front door rang at nine in the evening; we all heard it—Helios and I in the front room, and Mrs. Prince in the back. Evans was out walking with the mastiff and the terrier, so I went to open the door.

Until I rose Helios had gone on reading aloud, and I remember distinctly giving a glance at him and the room as I swung myself up on my crutch. His hair and beard looked fair and bright in the full light of the shaded lamp; there was a leonine streng

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about him, in spite of my knowledge concerning the twinkle native to his eye. As for the room, it was comfortable, but not the sort of room we liked ; it was stiff and what we called "bristly," although, as a matter of fact, there were certainly no bristles.

When the reading stopped there was only the sound of the wind and the sea. It was January. The wind blustered about the solitary house, and the sea answered it ; or rather, they both shouted at the same time, so animated seemed the discussion that they kept up.

In the square, brick-paved hall on which our sitting-room opened, a bright lantern hung, and shone out of windows on either side of the door. Helios always thought it a detestable habit to close shutters at night ; the lamps gave no more light for being enclosed, and those who were late abroad had a right to the human cheer of lighted windows. I did not think about this then, but it fits into the story here.

I was quite accustomed to open the door in the evenings, because Mrs. Prince never heard the bell when Evans was out ; but to-night I hoped that the visitor would not be one of our few friends in the neighbourhood, for I had on my oldest coat, and my hands were inky. When I unfastened the door the wind blew it wide open. I stood in the middle of the doorway and said nothing, for I was too surprised to speak or move. In the trellised porch, where the tendrils of honeysuckle were flapping wildly in the wind, stood two lovely maidens—faces and gowns

white as pearl, and no cloak to shelter them from rude weather.

I had often said that I had never spoken to a real young lady, never even seen one face to face. That, I suppose, was partly why I was too loutish to behave better than I did; but however accustomed I might have been to ball-rooms and drawing-rooms, I must still have been very much surprised to see, at this hour, in this weather, at the door of a lonely house, two young gentlewomen dressed in white. They had no hats, no cloaks; on each small head the hair was in a lovely curly heap. They were beautiful, white, delicate creatures, slender and gracious; and when they stepped back quickly until they were just outside the porch their action seemed quite natural, for an inky boy in an old coat, who cannot think of a word to say, is not a pleasing spectacle to young women who, being beautiful and great, must, of course, be able to choose what they will, or will not, look upon.

Speechless as I was, I had, of course, even in the first flash of that beautiful surprise, gathered the idea that a carriage and servants must be waiting at the gate, that some mistake or accident had brought its occupants up our drive.

They stood each in a timid attitude, quite clearly to be seen, though withdrawn a little, the elder and taller shrinking further toward the gloom. Then the younger said, in clear, gentle tones, the key perhaps a little high with excitement, the accent perhaps foreign, but certainly that of good birth—the younger said:

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"Is there a Mrs. Ferguson?"

"No," said I; and then I added, in the baldest possible manner, and perhaps I spoke harshly because of the wind and because of my shyness: "There isn't any Mrs. Ferguson."

"What lady lives here?" she asked.

I could not induce myself to consider our house-keeper in that light. I replied: "None."

The elder girl put out a slender hand, touching the white sleeve of each other, and spoke to her in a low voice which I could not hear, but I was aware, from her whole attitude, that she was advocating flight, a thing which appeared to me preposterous, for certainly there was nothing about our plain, comfortable household which could cause fear to anyone.

"Please come in," I said. "Please come in and get warm."

I moved aside so that they might have plenty of room to pass me.

Then the elder spoke, for although it seemed to me that they wanted to run, like naughty children, they were too dignified and polite to do so.

"We have mistaken the house, I am afraid. We are sorry to have troubled you."

The voice was grave; but the face of the younger, although she had moved backward, was looking into mine most wistfully.

"Oh, no," I cried; "you haven't mistaken the house. This is the right house—this is Mr. Ferguson's house, right enough."

They stood looking at me. Certainly they were

very white; only their eyes seemed bright, regarding me, apparently, with a feverish desire to read me through and through. They must have been cold; they seemed to shiver; certainly the wind blew their white garments. I remembered the whiteness of their glimmering features and garments afterwards so distinctly that, although I never confessed it, there were moments in the next few hours in which I seriously wondered whether they might not have been what some people called ghosts.

I hopped into the porch, for, by almost imperceptible movement, they had withdrawn down the walk where night was darkened by bay and myrtle, and the outstretched branches of an arborvitæ.

"You haven't mistaken the house," I repeated. "It's the right house."

The wind rushed, shouting and laughing, blowing my voice back into the hall. Helios opened the sitting-room door, and called out to know what was the matter. I went back to tell him to come out, for I knew that his appearance and address were much more pleasing and proper than mine.

"Come out, my liege," I cried, "and speak to two ladies."

"'Ladies,'" said he; and his voice, a little scornful, echoed none of my panting impatience.

"They're in trouble. There's something up. Do come, or they'll drive away!" And making sure that he would follow me, I swung out again on my crutch, and down the path as fast as I could go, until the gloom of the winter night had closed upon the glow from our window, and I stood on the further

side of the swaying arborvitæ and, breathless and bare-headed, held by the carriage gate.

There was the open road; I could dimly see its white line far and near. There were the long, undulating levels of the sand-dunes, the glimmer of the sea foam, and the huge arc of the horizon showing in bands of dim, gray light under the night wrack which filled the rest of the sky with gloom—a wide enough prospect, but nowhere was there the flutter of a white dress or a carriage in which fine ladies could find shelter from darkness and rough weather. No horses could have drawn a carriage out of sight and hearing in so short a time. Their feet would have been pounding audibly upon the road, and the road ran either way upon open common so that the dark form of carriage or fly could have been seen, whether it were going onward toward our village or inland to the county town that lay some ten miles away.

A moment made me quite certain that our visitors had not escaped by the road, so I turned down a path that led under an evergreen arch into the garden, which was protected by high brick walls. There was a door in the wall at the other end of it which visitors who walked by the dunes from the river-side would enter, and this door I reached in a minute or two, and looked out. The wind swept laughing over the open ground, setting every spear of sand-grass dancing. It was dark; but here again there was certainly no pedestrian dressed in white nor any shelter wherein such might find cover.

Until this moment it had not even occurred to me

that beautiful ladies could get lost. I stood by the back door entirely amazed. In that garden there was little more than rows of vegetables, swaying fruit trees, and ivied walls. The glass houses were shut. There was no hiding-place. The wind eddied within the enclosure, shaking and hustling the leaves and branches.

I was going again toward the front when, in a lull between the gusts, I certainly thought I heard a woman or a child sobbing. The sea was singing its ceaseless hush-a-bye. From far away the wind came again hastily, flouting me as it passed; and then again I thought I heard uncontrollable sobbing, the sound of which seemed to be smothered; but I could hear no footfall, no voices. I could not tell from which side the sound came. I could have averred that my ladies were nowhere within hearing, as they were nowhere within sight; yet, having thought I had caught the sound of a hopeless sorrow, my heart was wrung with an almost frantic desire to help.

I wondered why Helios had not followed me, and thought suddenly that perhaps he had found the visitors I sought in vain; so I went back up to the front of the house, and in; but when I got to the parlour he was sitting just as he sat before the door-bell rang.

"Well," said he, looking round the shade of the reading-lamp with twinkling eyes, "have you found the ladies?"

"They are ladies," I said hotly, "and they must have been in some trouble to come here, and they

cannot be far away now. Surely mere humanity might make you try to find out what they need."

I did not like to tell him of the sobbing I thought I had heard, partly because I was already doubting my own sense of hearing, and partly because I was much too shy to speak of anything that appeared at all sacred unless it could not be helped.

"I don't understand at all." His tone was most matter-of-fact. "Who was it that was at the door? If two persons were in trouble and wanted help, why did they not come in and say what they wanted?"

"I think they were frightened."

"At what?"

"I don't know."

"They would have done well to make up their minds as to that before they rang the bell. If they had come for help, why should they run away when you opened the door?"

"Because they thought that you—" Then I suddenly stopped and blushed hotly, remembering that I had to refer to a subject never mentioned between us. I had to go on: "They asked if you were married, my liege."

He was now thoroughly surprised and puzzled. I knew it by the way he narrowed his eyes as he looked at me.

"Did they say so?" he asked. "But they were not at the door more than an instant. Speak out and be plain. Who were they?"

I told him as well as I could all that had happened—that is, I began to tell him.

"Stop! stop!" he cried. "You are talking nonsense. You say two women were at the door—"

"Not women," I said.

"Well, girls, then—"

"Not girls," I cried—"at least, nothing that we call women and girls about here, and no one the least like the rector's wife or Mrs. Barker. They were high-born maidens of a very beautiful sort. And when I told them that there was no Mrs. Ferguson, they grew very white and shrank away; but I believe they are somewhere in the garden or behind the wall yet, and I am going to look for them if you won't, for I am certain they are in trouble."

At this, Helios got up and took down the bright lantern that hung in the hall. He went out into the front shrubbery, and I with him. He turned the glare of the light everywhere, going up and down the path and among the shrubs, and out on the road, and round the garden wall, and into the garden again by the back door, and called out several times at different points to know if anyone was there. I followed him everywhere, until he had returned, hung up the lantern again, and we were both back by the fire.

"I hope you are satisfied," he said. "Someone has been playing a trick on you."

"It wasn't a trick," I said doggedly.

He stood looking down into the fire which he had just poked. He said:

"Will you explain to me now, soberly and quietly,

what you meant by saying that these tricksters thought I was married?"

"They asked for Mrs. Ferguson." I blushed again, and affected to be picking up a cinder from the hearthrug.

"You could not have told them that I was not married," said he.

"I said there was no Mrs. Ferguson—I meant here, of course." Then I added: "I'm sure, my liege, I don't know whether there is, or there isn't, anywhere."

"Neither do I," he said sadly; "but that can have nothing whatever to do with this night's commotion."

CHAPTER V

FORTUNE OR MISFORTUNE?

WHEN Helios was very young, in fact, as soon as he came of age—he had bought Lone End, the place in which we lived. I always think that this action of his showed a great deal of character; but in accord with that delightful inconsistency which, a contrasted with fiction, is apt to suggest, I have never been able to see that the act was at all characteristic. He was a nice man, fond of the fun afforded by the daily trifles of life; unlikely, so far as could have been predicted, to choose the lot of a recluse.

He had been told by the doctors that his lungs were weak. Being a genius, he believed in the healing properties of sun and sea and air before science had drawn aside the thick curtains that used to shelter every invalid. Then it was that he came down to this village and made friends with the fishermen. He wrote a small book about fishermen which obtained fame. On his majority, in that debonair way in which youth constantly does something which moulds the whole after-life, he bought the only house near the fishing village.

There had been, of course, the usual local agent at his elbow to assure him that he could at any time easily sell the place for double what he was giving for it. Naturally enough, this enhanced value was never actualised; and although he worked on in the literary trade with fair success and established his health, he had never been able to sell the house upon terms that he could easily afford. He once called it "The old man of the sea," for it clung to him 'in spite of his earlier efforts to get free. Now he had become greatly attached to it; at the time of my story, the greatest trial that could have happened, I think, to him or to me would have been to lose it.

I will tell first what little I knew as a boy of my uncle's marriage, which I could not avoid hearing about from the neighbours, rich and poor.

The land round our little freehold all belonged to the estate of North Hay, owned by people of the name of Girdlestone. They were a family of some renown, and in time past of great wealth. They had, in successive generations, fought in France under Queen Mary, in England with Cromwell, in Spain with Lord Wellesley. Sometimes they went in for diplomacy; the richest of them had been ambassador at the Spanish Court. The family had arisen in the days of Henry VIII., and it might be said to have set just before Helios came to Lone End, when the old squire, Ralph Girdlestone, being in dire poverty, went to America to superintend the working of a gold-mine. He took with him a wife and son and

daughter; and when the younger Ralph Girdlestone came of age he joined his father in breaking the entail which bound most of the property.

The mine collapsed, and the father died. The younger Ralph came home to claim the property, but discovered that his father had left a will with the family solicitors in the market town, and that will divided the property equally between himself and his sister.

While the women remained in America the lawyers raised a difficulty about the title-deeds, and the young squire, whom nobody liked, only succeeded in raising a second mortgage upon a couple of farms. With this money he speculated, it would seem successfully, went to London, owned some race-horses, and was recognised for one season by such of our county families as had houses in town. He then ran away from his debts, disappearing in a small dust-cloud of disgrace.

The neighbourhood did not suffer as long as a good tenant, General Oldham, remained at North Hay. The general had plenty of money, and plenty of daughters, and plenty of servants. To all intents and purposes he benefited the neighbourhood more than the most steady-going of the Girdlestones had ever done, although all the tradespeople, the fisher-folk and the clergy, within a twenty-mile radius always shook their heads and said it was a great pity "the family" kept away. During this time a tradition arose concerning the Girdlestones to the effect that they, both men and women, had exceeded other men and women in personal beauty, and also in

courage and a certain extraordinary ingenuity of resource on critical occasions when necessity evoked those powers. Their personal beauty had come into the family with a Spanish bride, who had also a dowry of a more material sort which she had not bequeathed to her descendents.

Personally, at the time this story begins I never believed a word that was said in favour of the Girdlestone family, except as to their good looks, which seemed indubitable. On account of my uncle's "misfortune" I hated them, root and branch, all that might now exist, and all who lay quietly in the north transept of the church—I was convinced that they had all been wicked as beautiful. My uncle's marriage, as regards his part in it, came about in a way perfectly natural to his generous character, and, as regards the Girdlestons, consistent only, I felt assured, with great wickedness, although what sort of evil I had not been able to decide.

The Oldhams had lived at North Hay a year or two after my uncle's purchase of Lone End. Then, when his last daughter was married, the good general very considerably died; by this means his large fortune was divided to the great benefit of his sons-in-law and their families. His many servants were dismissed, his horses and dogs led away, and such furniture as he had added to the ancestral furniture of the Girdlestons was sold. The senior of the firm of solicitors who had always represented the Girdlestons locked up the house with its worn heirlooms, and only a colony of rooks was left on guard. The garden became overgrown; a desolate

appearance soon fell upon all that had been most cheerful. Something more fortunate still for the neighbourhood occurred, for a ghost, or ghosts, which seemed to be looking out for a suitable abode, very quickly entered as unprofitable tenants.

Had the time been a century earlier, or the folk of our neighbourhood more given to pleasures of the imagination, the mere loneliness of the house would probably have accounted for the tale; but as it was, it seemed more probable that someone, for some reason, did at times make furtive visits to the old place. Helios and I believed the visitors to be human, but the rector's wife always spoke of the author of lights or foot-tracks at North Hay as the "visitant," which, we gathered, she took for the feminine of "ghost."

It was at least known certainly with regard to this desolate epoch of North Hay history that Mr. Carp, the senior of the solicitors before referred to, drove one day to look over the house for some business purpose, and was seen by the man who drove him and the clerk, who had come to copy an inventory, to come precipitately out of the house again and lock the door behind him with a pallid countenance, and they said he made a very poor excuse for not accomplishing his errand that day. This story seemed well authenticated, and was, as Helios said, to those who knew the three men concerned, as convincing a ghost story as any he had ever heard.

Upon this foundation there grew up a variety of

tales, more or less interesting, of lights seen in the windows by belated travellers, and sounds heard by those whose business or pleasure caused them to pass the place. Helios and I had a method by which we tested these stories; he invented it, and I have seldom found it to fail. If the story, however circumstantial and however well-attested, was such as anyone would be likely to imagine or delight to repeat, it might be set aside as untrue; but if it had in it something quite unexpected, absurd or unromantic, that the ordinary story-teller left out or slurred over, you had then something worthy of investigation, and that would probably turn out to have a foundation of fact.

The haunting of North Hay lasted about three years after the Oldhams left it. The house was then again occupied for two years. After that, when it was again shut up, the ghost, whoever or whatever it was, appeared to return, and persisted in irregular manifestations up to, and for some time after, the time my story begins. It was that two years temporary occupation that brought my uncle his "misfortune."

The temporary occupier was no other than Theresa Girdlestone, who came from America after her mother's death, and hired three respectable servants, and lived, as she certainly had a right to do, in the old family home. She was not young; she looked, perhaps, older than she was; the village folk, whose daughters always married early, spoke of her quite freely as an "old maid." She was credited with a character in accordance with the tradition of the

Girdlestone women; but, as a fact, she had a shy, almost frightened manner, although very handsome.

Her Western life made her seem quite a foreigner. Those who called at North Hay cherished an unsatisfactory feeling about their social dealings with her, a feeling which they described in such different ways, and attributed to such different faults of character, that there was little to be got out of their stories. Of her servants, two went to London after she left, and the third always steadfastly insisted that Miss Girdlestone had lived for those two years in the most steady manner, keeping that wing of the house which she inhabited, and one small south garden, in good trim; that she was economical and scrupulous about paying her bills—which was, indeed, very unlike her brother—plain in her dress, kind in her intercourse with the poor, but unwilling to visit her neighbours, and very unhappy.

No one doubted her unhappiness, for her brother's character and the fallen fortunes of the family gave her good reason for melancholy. There seemed but one way, indeed, by which she could escape from sharing her brother's social disgrace, from the narrowness of her income, and from the gloom attaching to the old home; the way of escape, of course, was marriage.

At that time "young Squire," as he was still called, was lost. When he disappeared he was in debt for more than the value of his share of the estate; but the sale, which had been put off while

his mother and sister remained in America, was still deferred pending his return.

It was not at all surprising that, in such a case, Miss Girdlestone should want above all things a protector and champion, want a surer social position and a happier home than the decaying house. It was assumed that she wanted a husband, and that, with the marked ability of her family, she fixed her choice upon my uncle. I believe I was told that she made his acquaintance designedly, and laid all her misfortunes and unhappiness before him so constantly, so artfully, and with such an appearance of disinterested modesty, that he offered to marry her. At any rate, he did marry her; and then what the neighbours called his "misfortune" occurred.

A strange man from London entered the village on the day of the wedding, just when the ceremony was over, and finding the church empty, went on to the rectory, where the rector and his wife had very kindly given the bride her wedding breakfast. This strange man was closeted with my uncle and his bride for about an hour; after that he took the bride back to London with him. He was a well-to-do solicitor—a Mr. Newberry—of very benevolent appearance; and whatever the cause of Mrs. Ferguson's departure, the rector, as far as he understood, approved it, for he drove the unhappy lady and the stranger some fifteen miles to another railway station, so that it was some days before the neighbours, from whom I had gathered this much of the story, knew when she had gone. Where she had

gone, and why, they did not know, and at this time neither did I.

All that I knew more than this was that Mr. Newberry continued to be a friend of ours.

CHAPTER VI

LONE END AND THE NEIGHBOURS

LONE END was in a corner between the outflow of a tidal river and the open coast. Close by, to south of us, lay the sea—nothing between us and it but the sand flowers and grasses. To the east was the river, which brimmed to the old sea-dykes twice a day, and as often bared its glistening mud-banks to the air. High forests to the west caught and kept much of our rainfall. Our sun was apt to rise and set in all the glory of those vapours which the mingling of fresh water and salt throws skyward. Winter and summer, spring and autumn, there were many days when the angels, who, I suppose, have charge of such things, painted for us fair pictures of sky and water in indigo and dove colour, and long horizontal fires behind glowed or leaped with all the colours that flame can take. The big ships and the little ships, the fishing boats and the black wingless things that travelled with long tresses of smoky hair behind them, all appeared in the sunrise and passed through the day, and in the evening disappeared again in dimness, when the sun went down behind the roofs

of our fishing village and the blue moors and the straggling headlands of the western coast.

Our sand-dunes ended at the river-side with an old brickyard, where the bricks in which we lived had been made by an eccentric gentleman a century before; but the yard, as far as we knew, had produced no others. Its mossy sheds, now decayed, lay by flower-crown clay-pits.

It is a delightful characteristic of rural England that in every remote recess of the coast there is always a good admixture of the foreign and romantic element. Our nearest neighbour was a farmer who lived in the old North Hay Dairy Farm on the river, and was a woman. She was ill-tempered, but an excellent farmer and dairy-woman. She had married a shipwrecked Portuguese sailor, who naturally became meek, and took to sitting in the ale-house when on land, but whether he was a good sailor or not I do not know.

Next in proximity was the ghost that lived in the great empty halls of North Hay, and who had such various descriptions that they were as good as none, for, as philosophy remarks, there must be something that a thing is not if it is to be defined at all.

Next come Captain and Mrs. Barker, legally and mentally a unit, but his half was chiefly idle, and her half constantly concerned in an active way with the young Barkers, whose name, for aught I ever knew to the contrary, might have been legion.

Then came the village, consisting chiefly of a little fleet of some fifteen fishing boats, with cottages and fishermen and wives and children to match. It

included also a retired sea-captain, who lived in the largest house that stood on the village street, and had a German wife, a stout and clever lady who patiently taught me German in all the years of my teens.

Just beyond the village came two comfortable houses with large and amply decorated grounds, occupied by the families of retired tradesmen from our market town. Looked at with candid eyes and from a distance, they appeared to be most delightful homes of delightful people. I am obliged to class these houses as our neighbours rather than their inmates, for their inmates never had anything to do with us. I always felt a lump in my throat when I thought of these houses, because they seemed to have all the things in them that one reads about in stories—nice girls, brothers that came home from school, godmothers, Christmas parties, mothers and fathers and babies, funerals and weddings, and all such things as make life a delightful pageant when people go through it in large groups, dancing or mourning, but always holding hard by each other's hands.

In the centre of all stood the rectory. The rector was always running about the village, and holding services and preaching. He was so good that he lived up to his ideals, and so lacking in goodness that his ideals were such as he could live up to. The climax of importance in the neighbourhood was the rector's wife, who had never spoken civilly to my uncle since he formed a habit of occasional attendance on Sunday evenings at a little chapel in a further village, and who never looked at me without the

gaze of commiseration and the admonishing word. This lady always wore a bonnet with a high feather which was, indeed, the very type and summary of her attitude towards all mankind. In her estimation she represented the Church, and the Church, in her mind, was a thing of social distinction. I doubt very much whether the Pope of Rome himself lays, in his heart, so proud a claim to be the mouthpiece of Divinity as did our rector's wife; and it was obvious that she conceived of the Infinite as being something very fashionable and aristocratic.

On the opposite bank of our river, in full view, lay a strip of poor farm land, which had been bought soon after my advent at Lone End by a colony of French nuns, said to belong to an agricultural order which could no longer make a living in France. At all times of the day, and in all weathers, we could see these women doing men's work in the fields. There were six or eight of them, and a varying number of novices.

The rector's wife, who had had the first news of their purchase of this barren bit of English soil, regarded it as an important move in a diabolical scheme for the perversion of the English race. She wished us all to see in them the craft, the cleverness, and the cruelty of the most accomplished villains among the sixteenth century Jesuits. Indeed, such was the theological disturbance of our little world, produced by the waving of the feather, that the nuns made an appeal to my uncle as a magistrate, because they found it hard to induce the shopkeepers to sell them what they needed.

It may be as well to explain here what our relations were to the French nuns, who for four years had occupied the opposite bank of our river.

We knew nothing of their arrival in the district until one stormy winter day we noticed what looked like a series of black balloons with smaller balloon things on the top of them. The nuns wore round black hoods, into which all the cloth of an ordinary nun's veil seemed to be gathered, and round black cloaks, which were like their grandmothers' dress skirts tied into a neck-band. The result, when they faced our winds, was in the same shape and proportion as a cottage loaf. That day the wind was driving a mist before it, and I remember well, when the black, bobbly things continued to come up the drive, it was some time before we could at all make out what was coming. At length there were found to be three women inside them.

They were apparently of the labouring class—as far as we from first to last could make out, rather stupid women, too anxious to make a bare living and perform the duties imposed upon them by the rules of their Order to think of anything else. They were accustomed to field work, and, having lived by the sea before, to the management of a boat. To the land which had been bought for them belonged a boat; they could not afford horses; and consequently it was much easier for them to come across the river at certain times of the tide and deal at the shops in our village, than go further inland on their own side of the river. They had been unable

to overcome the surliness of our villagers, and after my uncle had made peace for them they were always as friendly with us as they had time or spirits to be with anyone. They came over the river about twice a week, at whatever time the tide made the crossing easiest; and Helios allowed them in rough weather to tether their boat at our old landing stage near the brickyard.

The nunnery added somewhat to our liveliness by the occasional summer *pensionnaires* they had from abroad. The first summer they had two very agreeable French governesses, who were supposed to teach me French conversation, but who, not being able to cope with my conversational agility, were in reality well instructed by me in the English language. They were so delighted with the proficiency they acquired and the liberal fee which Helios gave them for the reception of this benefit, that every summer after that the French sisters sent every foreign boarder they received over to ask if they might not teach the young gentleman whatever language they happened to speak. Helios, however, was not so well pleased with the results of the first conversation lessons; and when elderly females arrived, offering to teach me Aramaic or modern Greek or Russian, they were not indulged with that benefit that I could so easily have conferred upon them.

One morning, only a few weeks before my vision of the maidens, the last application of this sort had come to us. A handsome little Spanish woman called one morning. We were both charmed with her; there was a crispness about her ribbons and

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muslins, a healthy brown about the very wrinkles which betrayed her age, a brightness of eye, a gloss on her silver hair, which were exceedingly attractive. She was a short woman, and had in consequence that extreme dignity of carriage which gentlewomen of the last generation who felt themselves at a disadvantage as to height frequently acquired.

This delightful foreigner said so many interesting and agreeable things before she disclosed the object of her visit that we were both taken by surprise when we found that she was staying with the nuns, and was anxious to instruct me in the Spanish language.

I suddenly conceived a desire to acquire that language. I explained to Helios that it had always been my fondest ambition to travel in Spain.

The little lady sat looking from one to the other of us, like an elegant little hen-bird listening with critical ear to the songs of her admirers.

Helios had the baseness to tell her, in his best French—she had only spoken French—what the result of my last foreign lessons had been; at which she laughed very much, and made herself so agreeable, and showed herself so interested in what she called our “curious foreign ways,” that I remember Helios showed her over the house and garden before the interview terminated.

CHAPTER VII

THE PEARL IN THE FLOWER-POT

ON the morning after the mysterious visit of the maidens I was up early, to the riverside to see that no boat had lately crossed from the convent, on to the hill where I could see the Dairy Farm, and then off to the village, where I visited the fishermen, my German teacher, and the Barkers. But I could find no trace, or any hearsay evidence, to corroborate my story. I was careful not to tell that story in asking questions, because it would only have augmented the ghost stories that were afloat about North Hay, without exciting in our neighbours any belief in the actual event.

It will be easily understood that my vision of lady visitors took hold of my fancy to the eclipse of those more permanent interests—the varieties and vagaries of our neighbourhood, which, till that night, had amused me very well; but when two nights had passed, I was able to speak to Helios about it without any disturbance of my pulses.

"You know, my liege," I said in an instructive tone, "you are more disturbed with regard to what you think my hallucination than you will admit.

You are afraid that I am becoming subject to tricks of fancy. You pretend that you take little interest in the affair because you think that best for me ; but in reality you are thinking of consulting Mr. Quack."

We called our doctor "Mr. Quack," chiefly because Mrs. Prince had such an unbounded respect for his wisdom.

Helios was writing, as he nearly always was, and appeared to pay no attention.

I put my crutch¹ in the middle of an open space on the floor, and swung myself completely round on it. I had taken years to teach myself this feat ; I considered the exercise wholesome, and the agility of the pirouette motion beyond praise ; but Helios was convinced that the centrifugal force would at some time prove too strong for my arm, to the detriment of me and the furniture. This, which I considered my prize trick, had consequently become a means of commanding his attention when all else failed.

"If you do that again—"

"I will do it again," I rejoined. "I will do it again ten times, if you don't talk to me. How would you like it if you had seen the sea-serpent, and I always occupied myself with something else whenever you mentioned it, conveying the suggestion obviously that the theme was not appropriate to good sense or good morals?"

"You become more consequential every day," he cried. "Really ! I should have no objection to all the nice girls in the world dancing round the house in evening dress, if they could only bring you down

from your egotistical complexities and simplify you."

"But," said I, "I want you to realise that you can't simplify me merely by pretending that you think my vision of the other night unimportant. Admit in a rational manner that it is important, and then I won't tease you any more about it to-day."

"Important to whom? and compared with what?" he asked. He raised his eyebrows, and called me "Alice," as he always did when I grew romantic.

"Important to them, and important to us," I said; "and that to a greater degree than any incident of our everyday life."

Again he raised his eyebrows.

"Dinners? Teas? Writing of books?—I refuse to allow these to sink into relative unimportance, and you must advance proof before I can allow that epithet to be applied to the incident at all."

"Easy proof!" I cried. "If there were two high-born maidens astray in the darkness, and seeking some hoped-for shelter at our door, you must grant them equal importance with shipwrecked sailors, or beggars fainting by the wayside; and I have known you bestir yourself for days for such people. If you believe the story I told you, you must bestir yourself on behalf of beauty in distress; or, on the other hand, if you do not believe, you must either regard me as in a bad way, mentally or physically—which again is important—or else you must think that I

have taken to acting a part and telling lies, which I also wish humbly to point out would be important. Q. E. D."

I felt that I had him, and was prepared to be magnanimous.

"I don't think any of those things," he said. "I think that two persons did come to the door, that some freak of light and shade, in combination with your lively imagination, made them appear to you extraordinary, when, in fact, they may have been ordinary. I think you are increasing to yourself the marvel by allowing your fancy to dwell upon it."

"Very well!" I said; "very well! Now I know how far you really respect me and my powers of discrimination. Yes, I see you still look upon me as a child. Well, sir, what do you think of this?" I put my hand into my pocket and drew from it the only result of a day and a half's search. I held out the result in my palm, and Helios leaned over and peered at it. "Found at your own door, sir, in the plaster vase where geraniums grow, hidden under the leaves that fell that night. I only found it by accident, putting the pot to rights as I came in just now."

Helios took the thing out of my hand, and held it to the light between his thumb and finger. It was a thing which jewellers might call a pendant, but how different from the common idea conjured up by that name! It was one large pearl set in tiny lacework of gold filagree. It hung on the slenderest of chains, hardly thicker than a golden horse-hair, only long

enough to have encircled a slender neck, and broken.

"You desired proof, sir," I went on, in fine irony. "I am a novice in such things. I have not mixed with the world—I have never had the pleasure of gentlewomen's society, still less have I had occasion to turn my mind to the baubles that women wear—but if I have any judgment, I think I know that this is no gew-gaw, or the ornament of a vulgar person."

"Don't be ridiculous, Alice," said my uncle. "This is getting serious."

"Alexis," I corrected.

"Alice," he insisted.

He looked so angry at the pearl and its delicate setting that I did not contradict him again.

"It is certainly genuine," he said, "and discoloured. I do not think this workmanship is of the last hundred years. It is exceedingly annoying that it should have been dropped in our grounds. We must send a notice to the county inspector."

"Sanitary?" I asked.

"Police," said he. "The police could advertise it without saying where it was found."

"As you will call me Alice," said I, "you could not blame me if I burst into a flood of tears at the very thought of dealing so barbarously with so delicate a romance."

"I don't see what else there is to do."

"But, my liege, you must give weight now to my opinion, since my judgment is confirmed so far. I tell you that I am sure these girls were in trouble, and had come to this door, not by any mistake, but

under the impression, for some reason, that the house had a mistress from whom they could seek protection. Further, I beg you to realise that they could not have gone far away that night—not further than they could walk—for they had no conveyance. It seems to me our duty to search the whole neighbourhood to make sure there are no unfortunate ladies to whom we might be of service."

After a pause I added :

"I see that you do not take kindly to my view. Then tell me why, instead of being interested and compassionate at the thought of beauty in distress, you are so anxious to wash your hands of the whole affair?"

"It must be evident, even to one of your tender years—" Helios began.

"Go on!" I cried. "I pass by the insult."

"—That any woman good-looking and worthy of respect could have no difficulty in obtaining whatever help she needed in a civilised country, especially with such jewels as this to pay her way. Shipwrecked sailors and dying beggars sometimes require service at our hands that no one else is disposed to render them."

While I tried to conceive of circumstances to suit my case, he went on :

"I do not know much about precious stones, but I once handled a pearl not unlike this, which was sold for fifty guineas."

"Not unlike that?" I asked tentatively.

"All pearls are much alike to me," he said; "I am not a connoisseur."

I burst out :

"Why should they come here? It is a long way from anywhere, and they know our name. Perhaps it was wicked of me to ask here, but the lady here when Mrs. Prince might have asked them to come in."

"There is no one at all resembling your two young women who could possibly have any claim upon us. The only woman," added Helios, "who might claim my protection if she were in distress, would be the woman I married. She is not young; she is very ill, and not in this part of the country. She certainly would not have asked the question your fine ladies asked."

He had never told me as much as this about his wife before, and as he now spoke quite calmly and in a matter-of-fact way, I was emboldened to say wistfully:

"You said you did not know whether she was alive or not."

"I never said that," he asserted. "I could not have said that."

"But you did," I persisted gently. "You said it two nights ago."

He looked puzzled.

"Indeed, my liege," said I, "you certainly said you did not know whether you had a wife or not."

"When shall I ever teach you precision of language?" he returned. "Why will you always take words to mean more or less than they do? The one statement does not imply the other. The lady I married supposed herself to be a widow. She

had been married in America, and believed the man to be dead. Her brother sent down a messenger on the wedding day, who arrived just too late, to explain that she was not free. It was most distressing, and created a vast amount of talk because there were circumstances which made it inadvisable for her sake to make any explanation public."

"Did you mind very much?" I asked eagerly.

"What a boy you are!" he said. "A mere babe, yet in pinafores."

He flushed slightly and turned back to his work, but in a way that lifted a weight that had lain on my mind, for I knew now that he had not broken his heart over his loss, although he was quite unconscious of having admitted as much.

After a while I said; "Will you give me another day before you hand over that pearl to the police?"

"Are you going to spend the day witch-hunting?"

"I have an idea," I said.

"Out with it! You don't suppose I am going to allow you the private and personal use of an idea before you are of age."

"I shall be of age next year," I said; "and you ought to allow me a little pocket idea to practise with before I become absolute proprietor of all I possess."

We did not discuss the matter further just then, but I began to see, as the morning wore on, that he did not intend to let me go out alone with my idea. Yet, as he issued no orders, I coaxed Evans to put the horse in the trap after lunch, when Helios was in the garden helping Hudson to prick our purple

cabbages. We always grew a patch of purple cabbage where it could be seen from the back dining-room window, not because we liked pickles, but because we considered their foliage more beautiful than most garden flowers. I had not mentioned my proposed excursion, and Evans brought the trap round quietly to the front. I watched Helios from the back till the last moment. He was making holes with the dibble when I left the window ; but while I was somewhat laboriously climbing into the trap on one side, he quietly got into it on the other.

"Oh," said he, "is that you?"

"My liege," said I ; "any unexpected cleverness on your part is always as great a delight to me as if you were my own son."

So we drove out of the gate together. It was a day of soft wind, white lights and purple shadows flying over sky and sea and land.

CHAPTER VIII

A GHOST AT AUCTION

THE small sand-birds, that came some six miles up the river when the tide was out, were now wheeling about in flocks, making zigzags of black flutterings across the face of the low, dove-breasted heavens. Between the river and our road to town lay first the pasture fields of the North Hay Farm ; then came the wooded park of the great house, which stretched for half a mile. At the end of the park the road turned and skirted its northern boundary, and then ran close by the river. We passed through two quaint hamlets preserved from flood by walls and dykes. When we got near the town I put my hand on my uncle's arm.

"Draw up at the first hoarding," I said. "I want you to read something. Our neighbour, the ghost, is for sale."

And when we did draw up he uttered an exclamation of surprise at a bill of which I had heard a rumour. It announced that the manor of North Hay—the park, the house and all it contained—were to be sold by auction on a certain day a month hence. The bill enumerated the contents of the house from garret to cellar—furniture which, for the most part, had been

there for at least four generations, and much of which must have been worthless.

As we were reading this a man on horseback approached, coming out of the town. He was Lawless, my uncle's solicitor; his firm also had in their hands the affairs of the Girdlestons, of North Hay. It was he whom I particularly wanted to meet.

"I was just going out to see you," said Lawless.

"This is the first that I have heard of this," said Helios, making a gesture toward the bill.

We were at one of those desolate street ends which in our times form the approaches to almost every dear old country town. Here a row of unsightly brick cottages; there a wall enclosing the yards of a new factory; here a field where rubbish was dumped, fenced from the road by advertisement boards; there an old house in a garden which had once been beautiful, but had long fallen into neglect and was now a laundry.

The solicitor glanced up and down. There was no one near. He brought his horse close beside us.

"Ralph Girdlestons has returned," he said. "He came in on us yesterday. It seems he has been some days at the 'Blue Bell.'"

"The Bell," said Helios. "Where's that?"

"It's that tavern on the next road, decent enough, perhaps, but very poor. Convenient for North Hay by the field path. He has little cash and no credit."

"Is it as bad as that?" asked Helios.

The Spanish Dowry

"The fact is, some money-lenders in London have been writing to us, insisting upon the sale of the property on the ground that Girdlestone is indebted to them for twice the amount it will realise. Now Girdlestone comes and says he's been living in Mexico, and has a wife and family, and has brought them over to France. He admits that he has been hiding from his creditors, but has now come back to go through the Bankruptcy Court. He had put the place in the hands of a London auctioneer some weeks ago, and only came to us when the bills were actually posted."

Helios asked several questions. Had Girdlestone actually had an auctioneer down to make an inventory at North Hay without consulting his solicitors? Was there any evidence that what he said about his Mexican family was true? And, last of all, had his sister consented to the sale?

When Helios spoke of the sister, who was by reputation his own wife, he used a graver tone, and Lawless, who was eager to gossip about the squire, with perhaps the only person in the country with whom he had a right to discuss the Girdlestone affairs, left the question of the sister to the last, as Helios had done. Interrupted only now and then by the restless movements of our horses or his own, he sat there in the public road, and poured forth his tale in low, excited tones as privately as he could have done in any secret chamber. Nothing that passed interrupted us. A rattling milk cart, a woman with a shawl over her head, a child with a bundle—these were all that went by. The

advantage of the place of colloquy to me was obvious because, although Helios had evidently no objection to my hearing everything, he would certainly not have repeated the half of what was said.

Lawless explained first that he and his partners had no evidence for or against the Mexican story, except that Girdlestone appeared to have sailed from the Gulf of Mexico in a French ship.

"He certainly has not been stationary in Mexico," remarked Lawless, "for our American agent, who has been following him, had word of him in San Francisco not long ago."

"I have less faith in that agent than you have," remarked Helios.

"Yes," he said; "but I hope, Mr. Ferguson, that the result will justify my faith. I cabled to him to-day. Then, as to the inventory on which these bills are made, Girdlestone says that he came down and broke into the house himself with a man sent by the London auctioneers, and they drew up the inventory. We have sent Mr. Carp up to town." (Mr. Carp was a senior partner in the firm Lawless belonged to.) "Of course, he will find out what he can about these London creditors who are down on Girdlestone. Our opinion is—but of course this is entirely in confidence—"

This was about the third time he had hesitated, and twice before Helios had recognised the hesitation and nodded; now he said formally:

"Alec's interest is the same as my own."

At which the lawyer nodded to me as if receiving

an introduction to the man, Alexis Ferguson, for the first time.

"—Our opinion is that Girdlestone's return to face his creditors is so foreign to his character that there must be something behind it."

Helios demurred :

"If the place is sold the proceeds cannot be his. His coming back to face his creditors looks too honest and straightforward to be his doing, I grant you ; but we do not know how he may have been driven."

"There is room for trickery even in what seems so plain. His London debts have always been an unknown quantity to us. These London money-lenders who hold his mortgages may be under agreement, after taking a good share of what is realised, to return the rest to him. Or, setting that aside, there are certain facts, which have given rise to the ghost story, which make Carp suspicious, although he does not know of what."

Helios only replied :

"Carp, of course, will have an interview with Girdlestone's sister."

"Yes, that certainly," said Lawless, who was looking now at the horizon, and speaking with gravity and deference that answered the particular tone Helios reserved for this subject. "I wish to ask—indeed, the most important thing I had on hand to-day was to ask—should Carp find it impossible to gain an interview with her upon our authority, whether he may use yours?"

"Not authority," said Helios.

"As, so far, we have no fresh evidence of your standing, would you be unwilling for us to use your name?"

He paused.

While Helios was evidently trying to make up his mind, the lawyer asked a further question:

"Would you be willing to be present at the interview, Mr. Ferguson? That would be best of all."

"From what I have heard," said Helios, "she is not strong enough to bear that; but Carp has good feeling—if he finds my influence necessary, he has my permission to use it through Newberry. He will go to Newberry to find out the address; he must act through him."

"As to ask that question, and to put you in possession of our information, were the objects of my coming to Lone End this morning, I will defer my ride until I can bring you Carp's news," said Lawless.

"If Carp finds that the sister objects to the sale, you will apply for an injunction to stop it," said Helios.

"You would wish it?" said the lawyer.

"I?" said Helios. "I have nothing to do with the matter."

Our lawyer looked at his horse's head, rubbing its neck gently with his riding-cane. It appeared to me evident that he did not agree with the last remark, and I was consumed with a desire that he should say so and give his reasons; but he only said:

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"As Mr. Girdlestone did not consult us, we represent simply the interests of his sister and her heirs. That being so, we have already applied for an injunction pending her decision."

He would have gone, but it was my turn now.

"Are there any ladies staying at North Hay?" I asked.

Lawless stared.

"There is a man and his wife there now. Girdlestone says he has put them in to clean up, but Carp thinks he is a bailiff put in by the money-lenders."

"Have you been down?" I asked keenly.

"Carp has. The place isn't fit for the bailiff's wife; there is certainly no one else there."

He turned and rode back into the town, and Helios was driving back into the country when it occurred to him that the expedition was mine.

"I forgot to inquire where you wish to go next," he said.

I suggested that we should find out if my maidens were at one of the hotels.

Helios turned back the horse with the docility that I knew betokened absence of mind. Although I was keen on the quest on which I was set, I was deeply interested in the scraps and ends and beginnings of matters concerning Helios and the Girdlestone family which the recent conversation had revealed. I consequently resented my uncle's silence; but, on the other hand, I was so grateful for having been, so to speak, legally recognised as an adult person and worthy of confidence, that I was

in two minds whether to belabour him with questions or express my approval of his conduct by leaving him alone. I acted upon the latter impulse. I am afraid the discretion I showed must have been rare, for it attracted his attention even to the point of astonishment.

"You don't know anything more about that pearl business and those girls than you have told me, do you?" he asked suddenly, and almost sharply.

"Certainly not," I replied, with reproach. "I always give you my entire confidence. What made you suspect me of such a crime as secrecy now?"

"Only that it occurred to me you would have been more curious about this Girdlestone business if you were not deeply engrossed in something else."

"It would be impossible for one to be more curious than I am; but I do not consider it polite to ask questions."

"Since when?" he asked.

He was returning to his usual debonair manner, and I almost laughed at his retort.

"Well, my liege," said I, "I should like to know all that you are willing to tell me."

"And I should much prefer to tell you rather than let your imagination run riot. I have, of course, been trying to discover whether the husband of the lady I married was or was not alive at the time of the marriage, and also whether he is yet alive. I worked through Newberry for years. When he learned nothing I put it in the hands of Lawless. Lawless has done more in a few months with a few pounds

than the expensive New York men that Newberry employed did in years; but we have not found the evidence we wanted, and probably shall not now. The trouble has been that we discovered some facts we were not looking for, which display Girdlestone in a very crooked light. I am thus involved in a knowledge of his affairs that I would rather be without. With regard to his sister, she has become seriously ill. We arranged a home for her at a doctor's house in Surrey, where she now is. She has always been most anxious to hide from her brother, and we suppose that he does not know where she is."

"And you are paying all the bills," I said admiringly. "She has done you the greatest injury she could, and you are doing for her what no one else would do!"

"How often have I warned you against jumping to conclusions for which you have no evidence!" said he.

We went to the good old hotel that stood in the middle of the town; and then we went to a huge new building which had just been erected on the edge of the moor. At this season both establishments were almost empty, and a little inquiry made it appear that no guests had been at either who bore any resemblance to my maidens. We intimated that some people, who must have been tourists—probably foreigners—had been seen in our region, and something had been dropped which might prove of value to the owner. The hotel-keepers were eager in their desire to find an owner

for anything, but they did not succeed in giving us any aid.

In returning, where the road to the village branched off from ours, I said:

"To the rectory, my liege. If Lady High Feather does not know of any visitors within a wide radius, then there are none."

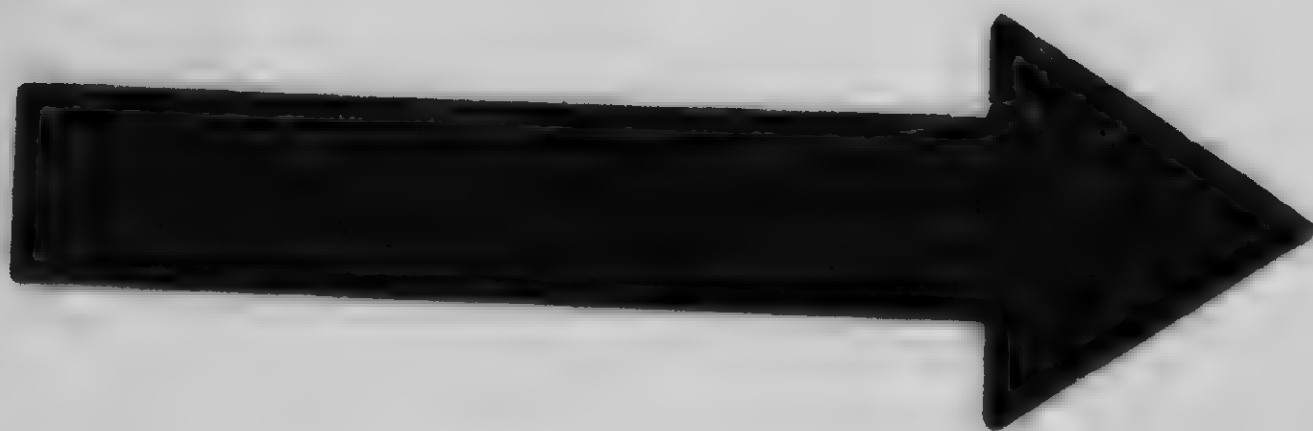
"What of the nunnery?" asked Helios.

"Lady High Feather keeps one eye always upon it; the rest of us have to be managed by the other."

Had I been wise I should not have been so wise in my own conceit that Lady High Feather knew all that went on at the nunnery. As it was, Helios, being less interested in the matter than I, gave no more thought to it.

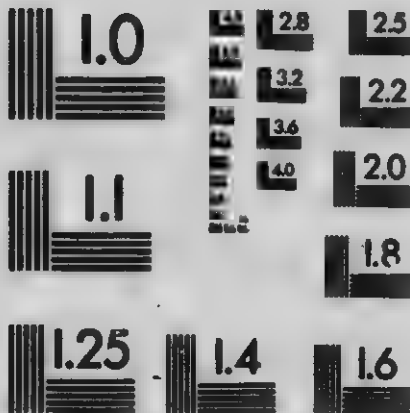
Before reaching the rectory we saw the lady popping in and out of houses in the village. She was full of zeal, and always kind to the meek. As we drove into the neighbourhood of the Feather I was instructing Helios what to say, and entreating him to say nothing else. Then we drew up alongside, and Helios descended.

It has taken me some years to discover that when Helios was magnificent in manner, and when he added to magnificence severity, he was feeling shy; and I was certain no one but myself suspected that he was unconscious of this terrifying demeanour. If the Feather could have bowed to man it would certainly have lain down before him now, for, ever since the lady had criticised his attendance at the fishermen's chapel, he had become more shy, and



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grander and grander in his rare attempts at conversation with her.

"Ah—good morning," said Helios. He was standing before her, hat in hand.

Lady High Feather bridled. I am sure she wanted to dart back into the cottage whence she had issued.

"I wish to ask if you happen to know if there are any strangers about who might be staying near the village for a night or two."

"What sort of strangers, may I ask?" She stood frostily.

"Strangers of almost any sort might serve our turn if we could find them."

Helios was so grand in his flippancy that it seemed to her serious.

"Really! Indeed! You had better ask my husband, Mr. Ferguson."

"Not at all." Helios gave what I called his "ballroom smile." "You would certainly be better informed than he if there was any visitor of quality lodging near the village."

"Really!" said the Feather again. "Well, a visitor of *that* sort would naturally be a *Churchman*; we should *all*, no doubt, have noticed him at church."

"Or a Churchwoman," suggested Helios, in remote accents.

"Really? Oh, indeed. I was not aware—" She bridled so severely as to appear almost to blush.

"No," said Helios; "but I was about to explain that Alec found a trinket of some slight value, that we thought might belong to some stranger."

"As to that," said the Feather loftily, "the women

who visit the neighbourhood, thanks to you, Mr. Ferguson, are papists."

She always insisted that Helios was responsible for the nuns because he had pointed out to the shopkeepers that they could not refuse to trade with folk who paid cash for what they bought.

"A papist might do," said Helios reflectively, "but not, I think, a nun."

"Perhaps you are not aware that they have progressed so far already in their perversion of our people as to have won a foothold at the Dairy Farm. There are no less than two novices there now."

At the nunnery there were some seven or eight nuns, and a varying number of younger creatures, who wore the same balloonish clothing, but of slightly different cut and hue. They were, as we vaguely knew, called novices, and were said to be usually sent back to a larger house of the Order after a year or two's instruction in agricultural work. We had heard some weeks before that the ill-tempered farming woman had been induced to take two of these as apprentice dairy-maids, because the nuns were hoping to set up a dairy of their own later on.

"What they call 'novices' are able to carry their pernicious doctrines," added the Feather.

"Considering that her husband, poor wretch, has always been a Roman Catholic," began Helios, "and she has shown no sign of being persuaded by him, she might perhaps be considered safe."

"Shown no *open* sign," corrected Lady High Feather. "The leaven of evil works secretly. Why did the wretched man come to live here? How did

he worm himself into the confidence of an honest Englishwoman? The reason we were not alarmed at the time, Mr. Ferguson, was that we regarded it as an isolated incident; but a few years later you'll perceive to what it leads—a nunnery is set up on the opposite bank of the river. It became quite obvious to me then that, innocent as he appeared, he was a Jesuit in disguise."

"Did he compass the wreck of the Portuguese barque from which he was rescued?" asked Helios.

"No doubt he did," said Lady High Feather impressively. "The loss of a crew more or less is a matter of small importance where the gain of their Church is concerned. Oh! I am quite aware that you are sceptical, Mr. Ferguson; but mark what happens next—the nunnery has not been there more than two years before they try to drive a bargain with this honest Englishwoman, by offering her sufficient money, to take two nuns into her house, ostensibly in order that they might filch from her those arts of the dairy which are, or ought to be, the peculiar property of this country. But you will find a deeper meaning in the scheme: it will not be long before this misguided woman will join the Roman Communion."

But here I leaned over the side of the trap, and eagerly asked "my lady" if she had been to the Dairy Farm since the advent of the pupils, and if she knew what they were like.

Warmed by her favourite theme, she had become more communicative, and we easily gathered from

her description that, of the women in question, one was already middle-aged, that both belonged, as did the sisters, to the working classes, that they wore the coarse, cumbersome costume of the Order, and, in short, could not have masqueraded as my maidens.

Entering into further details of the neighbourhood, we became convinced that no other visitors were in the village, or in any other house of the parish.

"Give it up," said Helios as we drove home.
"Give it up, Alice."

As to the novices who had come to milk cows and scour churns at the Dairy Farm, we ventured to hope that they were as callous in mind as they were said to be coarse in exterior. Either of us would rather have encountered a fretful bull any day than have met the farm mistress when trespassing on her land. Happily she kept closely to her farmyard, and we could comfortably pity the husband and servants at a safe distance.

CHAPTER IX

THE FIRST THERESA

THAT evening Helios spoke to me freely for the first time about his marriage.

One thing that our family experience taught us to understand was the curious condition of the marriage laws in the United States. The Federal Government embraces quite a large number of different States; and each State makes its own marriage law; and in quite a number of them a man can divorce his wife, or a woman her husband, on the simple ground of the other's absence, if that absence has been of some duration, and that marriage then ceases to be binding anywhere in the States.

Now, this was exactly what had happened in the case of that most unfortunate lady whom Helios had married. When Theresa Girdlestone's parents left North Hay she was fifteen years old.

In the new land, like a flower transplanted in a sunny border, she bloomed early. Wayward and high-spirited, at seventeen she married one of her brother's companions, against her parents' wishes. It was in accordance with the temper of the place and the hour, the heady haste and optimistic mind

of the gold-digging districts. The young man was handsome and warm-hearted ; he called himself Roy, an English corruption of a foreign name, for he was of mixed Spanish and French descent, from the State of Louisiana. The Girdlestones took refuge for the time, according to true old-fashioned style, in ignoring their daughter's existence.

This Roy had left his southern home and the Roman Catholic Church, and like most people when their minds are taken up by what seem the necessities of pioneer life, he had no notion at all of the relative importance given to things by an old-world civilisation. The Roys had three children—all girls. By that time the instinct of caution and longing for fixed conditions, which were the strongly-laid foundations of Mrs. Roy's mind, caused her to reject an improvident life. Her solicitude for her children strengthened her disapproval of Roy's ways, and she proposed to take them and return to her parents. It was a long journey, and when he refused to let the children go, she went alone to be reconciled to her father, supposing that he would interfere and obtain for her the custody of her children. She was very young, and ignorant of the laws of the land she lived in. She found her father unable to assume support of the children. The mine was shut down, he was in debt, and even more troubled by the ill-behaviour of his own son than by his financial difficulties.

After some time of fruitless waiting for her father to move, Mrs. Roy appealed to her brother. He had gone to another territory, but when, on hearing of

his father's failing health, he did receive, or decide to acknowledge, her letters, he returned, and, greatly to her joy, started to find his old companion, promising to bring him to reason, and fetch the children.

His first letters said that Roy had moved and could not be tracked; then he wrote that the children had been sent to Roy's relatives in Louisiana. For a year or two before this yellow fever had made terrible ravages along the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. Girdlestone, in his hunt for the children, wrote several letters, which were not cheering, and at last came a letter telling that they had all taken the fever in their grandmother's house, and died. Some months later the unfortunate mother got a letter from her husband, stating that he had obtained a divorce on the ground of desertion, and married again. This was a matter on which Theresa's father was willing to bestir himself; but do what he would, he found that Roy had the law with him, and that his daughter was a divorced woman in the United States, while in English law she was not free to marry again.

It was not surprising that family pride and the timidity of misfortune made an explanation to their English friends — who would regard a divorced woman as disgraced — seem almost impossible. Carp had, of course, kept up a regular correspondence with them, sending the quarterly remittance. He had learned from the old squire that his son had fallen into bad company. About the daughter's marriage he had heard nothing; and when, after the father's death, the mother continued the correspond-

ence with them on behalf of herself and her daughter, they had no reason to suppose that Theresa had ever left her parents.

When Theresa returned to North Hay after her mother's death, she resumed her maiden name, saying nothing of her marriage. She seemed at first so broken by trouble as to be almost indifferent to any further change of fortune that life might bring. That she had no deliberate intention of injuring anyone by the deception may be very fairly assumed. What happened is merely an illustration of the maxim instilled into the mind of every schoolboy—that one lie, from whatever motive told, gives birth to two more.

Our health-giving winds, and the delicious mellowness of our soft, salt climate, brought the roses back to the cheeks of the broken-hearted lady. She very naturally preferred, in her daily walks, the lonely paths that led by moorland and shore to the village where she could do her household shopping, rather than the public high-road to the town; and it was impossible but that in these paths she should constantly meet Helios. Certainly I, of all the world, should know that she could not have spoken to him more than a few times without discovering that he was kind and good; and when her brother began, as he shortly did, to persecute her by secret messages into complying with an unreasonable request, it would have hardly been possible for her, with such training as she had had, to know that there was anything dishonourable in confiding only part of her misfortunes to Helios.

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Soon after her arrival at North Hay, she received a letter from an American friend of her father's, enclosing a newspaper notice of Roy's death, or, at least, of the death of a man of his name and age. She accepted unquestioningly all the freedom it gave her.

When Helios told me, just once and briefly, his own story of the marriage, he said, in his most grandfatherly tone, as if I should have frequent use for the information :

"Many people, Alec, would say that she only was to blame ; but that was not the case. Compassion is no sufficient motive for marriage ; nor is it honest of any man to enter into an engagement in which a supreme love is assumed, when he has any suspicion that he is without that strongest motive. As soon as Mrs. Roy told me, which she did a few days before the wedding, that she had been married before, and had not till then had courage to tell me, I knew well, what I suspected before, that I had no delight in her which could survive this confession, that if she had been in happy circumstances I should never, even at the first, have asked her to be my wife."

Helios also told me then that when Mr. Newberry had come on the wedding day and followed the wedding party to the rectory, he had presented a letter from Ralph Girdlestone which was dated from a town in Texas. It stated that, having received from his sister the intimation of her approaching marriage, he had gone thither in search of Roy, and found him alive. Instead of writing direct to her, he had written to Newberry, who was a family connection, asking

him to give the information personally to Mr. Ferguson; this was an insult to his sister, implying that she would have concealed his information; and Helios, knowing nothing then against Girdlestone except his debts, did not now know what to think about her.

Helios he. made other instructive observations, as if he foresaw that I should fall after into similar predicaments. He said that when between two people who confide in each other an accuser comes casting suspicion on either, the way in which the accusation is received will reveal and decide many things; that it is hard for a practical person to realise at the moment that the first look, the first word, the very turn of the head, after hearing the accusing voice, will go far towards deciding what the future relationship can be. He also remarked how difficult it is to be fair in a pressing personal dilemma, even when the affections do not overpower the judgment. I am thankful to say that I have had no use for these admonitions, except that they help me to understand his story.

When this letter was presented to Helios he was influenced as to the manner in which he received it by the fact that Mr Newberry was a worthy and kindly man of high reputation and character, and that he, Newberry, believed in Ralph Girdlestone's honourable intention, and suspected the bride of double-dealing. It was indeed years, Helios said, before he realised that the choice of such a man as a messenger only proved Girdlestone's cleverness and added no weight to the message.

At the time Mr. Newberry had pointed out all the evidence against the sister—her deceit, the fact that she had not sought details and confirmation of her first husband's death, that her brother had already taken more trouble with regard to her children than she herself had, and that the journey he had just taken to discover the truth about Roy showed him to be still honourable in family matters.

All this was too obvious to have caused remark if the minds of both men had not been confused by the distressing emergency and overlooked the real point at issue, which was simply whether Girdlestone's word was worth taking or not.

Mr. Newberry proceeded to give proof of his own unbiassed kindness by offering the unfortunate lady a home until all due inquiries should have been made. She herself appeared to them to be crushed by her brother's letter, and eagerly expressed her wish to retire into seclusion until proof of Roy's death could be found.

It was difficult in those days, when there was no railway from the Atlantic to the Pacific, to find a man in the South - Western territories of America; Girdlestone was lost again. His sister, whether from offended pride or from shame or from a listless distaste of the world caused by repeated disappointments, refused now to have any further communication with my uncle. She was induced to believe that the cost of her comfortable London quarters was defrayed by her patrimony, when in fact Helios sent a regular remittance on her behalf to Newberry. He twice went up to town, and Newberry got her to

have an interview with him, but these interviews did nothing to establish a better understanding. He was too deeply wounded to be trustful, and she had again lost health and love of life.

At last she conceived a determination, from which nothing could dissuade her, to return to America. She was provided with money and a companion, and sailed with a fixed purpose to see the graves of her children, and find out for herself the truth about Roy.

This expedition was either completely unsuccessful or she did not tell its issue. She returned to her London friends ill with heart affection which was incurable; and soon went, by her own wish, into that home in Surrey which she never again left, and where she was supplied with every simple luxury by my uncle's kindness.

This was all we knew when Helios first confided the story to me. Distressed by the lady's apparent disappointment and shattered health, he had recently renewed the search formerly given up as futile. Consulting Lawless, a new scheme of inquiry had been hit upon, and an agent sent to scour the yellow fever district for Roy's relatives.

The scheme, so far, had produced unexpected information about Girdlestone, but none about Roy.

CHAPTER X

IN PERPLEXITY

HELIOS had no intention of calling upon Ralph Girdlestone or discussing the new turn of affairs with him. After talking to me, he wrote a letter to Mr. Newberry. He wished to supplement what Carp might say with comments of his own. He was anxious that the sale of North Hay should take place and the debts be paid. He urged strongly that the sister should give up her share to pay, as far as possible, her brother's *bond-fide* debts; in fact, he urged precisely what Lawless, as our solicitor, had sent Carp up to prevent.

He paused in sealing the letter, as if arrested by an idea.

"What are you thinking about, my liege?"

"It is odd that the other pearl about that size which I once handled was one I sold on behalf of Mrs. Roy. It was in a ring that had belonged to the Spanish lady that one of her ancestors married. She sold it—" Helios paused again: perhaps the full pathos of the useless sacrifice had never struck him before—"to buy wedding clothes."

I record this remark because it was the first time

I ever felt my heart beat with compassion for that poor lady ; but I only said :

"My liege, was that ring part of the Spanish dowry? Can there be any truth in that story of the lost dowry?"

Now there was an old story that had been current for some generations about the bride that one of the Girdlestones had brought from Spain. She was a beauty. The Girdlestone beauty entered the family with her. She died young, and was buried alone in the graveyard of the church. All the rest of the Girdlestones lay in the north transept. Tradition said that the lonely tomb was hers because she, having been unhappy as a wife, had before dying hidden her rich dowry of jewels, so that when her hard-hearted husband sought the treasure, even before her body was cold, he could find nothing. The story was a good one, and of course ended by affirming that no one to this day had found the hidden treasure.

It was to this story I referred, but Helios gave no consideration to my question. In a minute he said :

"I can't see how any possible connection could exist between the two pearls ; but if the owners don't claim this one soon I'll send it up to Newberry, and get it valued by the jeweller to whom I sold the other, and he will be likely to know the date of the setting."

"You don't think there was ever a lost dowry, then?" I persisted.

"I do not," said he, in that casual tone which

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exhibits complete indifference of mind. He was again intent on sealing his letter.

In a minute he said :

"How can you be so foolish as to let your fancy play with such folly? Anyone with any knowledge of the world or power of reflection would see that if a thing of real value were lost in the house or grounds no effort would be spared till it was found. Stories of buried hoards are common in every neighbourhood; they are all fabulous."

Helios was a magistrate; so also was Captain Barker, a son-in-law of that General Oldham who had lived so long at North Hay. Helios now proposed that instead of giving our pearl to the police, we should only notify them and show it to Barker. I was willing enough that the mere fact of finding the jewel should be made known to Barker and his advice taken; but I was not willing that he should hear the tale of my disconsolate maidens. I have noticed that there are many men who will accept a trust or keep a secret which can be expressed in terms of money, who cannot be relied on to regard anything that savours of romance as equally important. I was sure that if Barker heard of my maidens he would, sooner or later, tell the story to his wife.

When Helios had agreed as to the meagre statement that was to be made, Captain Barker and his wife were invited to dinner. One very annoying consequence of Mrs. Roy's deception in returning to North Hay as Miss Girdlestone was that Helios had never been able to explain the cause of separation to

his neighbours. As long as she did not make any explanation public, he could not ; and, as a result, he limited his circle to a few tried friends who were willing to accept his silence.

Mrs. Barker had lived at North Hay during girlhood, and I, who had most romantic ideas about the old house which I had never entered, was very eager to ask her whether some of the details given in the bill of sale were correct or not. I went into the drawing-room after dinner before Captain Barker had lit his pipe, and quite forgot the shyness with which I usually regarded a silk gown and a lace collar.

"It says here," said I, pointing to the handbill I had taken out of my pocket, "'many valuable articles of carved oak of the time of Queen Anne.'"

"My husband says that sort of thing is put in to attract dealers from a distance," remarked she.

"But what are the things like?" I asked. "You have seen them and lived with them."

She was affable, and quite willing to tell me anything she could remember, though she did not find it easy to make her memory tally with the catalogue.

"My father had his own modern furniture ; it was not the fashion when I was a girl to value things according to their age. There were two large chests, I remember, one in the hall and one in the kitchen, which were elaborately carved ; but their hinges were broken and they were not kept

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polished. We used to hide in them when we were children, but we never thought them of value. Some of these chests of drawers and tables may have been in bedrooms we used—I think I can remember two or three. As to these cabinets, if they were in the house at all they must have been in the locked-up attics, which, you know, were packed with a good many old things the Girdlestons wished to keep, but which were too shabby to use. There were four of those attics. I have been in them with my father; he kept the key; but I don't remember anything interesting in the piles of broken furniture."

When my uncle's step was heard, she broke off the conversation and began to speak of the latest wreck on the coast. Like the rest of his neighbours, she considered it would be uncivil to mention the Girdlestons in his presence.

Helios and Captain Barker made out an advertisement which appeared in the local paper daily for ten days. It described the ornament, but not its value. Application was to be made to a jeweller in our market town. The pearl itself was sealed up and put in my uncle's safe, and a note of it sent to the police. The advertisement brought several applications, but none of any interest to us. All the girls who had, or said they had, lost chains and pendants of old-fashioned workmanship appeared to belong to the poorer classes, and the trinkets they described were worthless.

"Now," said I to Helios, when the ten days had elapsed, "what do you think of it?"

"I think," said he, "that you have had the rare good luck to stumble upon a real puzzle."

"I have come to the conclusion that a real puzzle is no good compared with a play one. When there is no clue you can't go on thinking about it. When you invent a mystery it is like looking through the bars of a gate into some forest glade; your mind can wander down each sunny gap with delighted fascination. But a real mystery that pops into one's life is like knocking your head against a brick wall."

"If you wrote it out twice," said Helios, "you would arrive at some intelligible expression of your simile."

"That is just why it is nicer to talk to you than to write for the common herd. A true friend is one who gathers the meaning out of the merest hotch-potch of words."

"I am very glad," said he, "that you are tired of bumping against a wall. At some future time we shall, of course, find out some very simple solution, to which little interest will attach."

He talked more seriously after that, saying that he had made, through Barker and Carp and Lawless, every possible inquiry, and that the only young girls at all answering to the description within many miles lived with their fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers. Some of these girls, he argued, either very mischievous or in some hysterical state, might easily have come masquerading to our house that night.

"Suppose," said he, "some naughty schoolroom miss has been pilfering her grandmother's jewel-case and lost part of its contents at our door; when

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the loss is discovered the girl, or girls, must confess and the jewel will be claimed. We do not want any story of that sort made public."

In the meantime, Ralph Girdlestone remained at The Bell. He was intent upon putting to rights the furniture at North Hay; he had the huckster-like notion of polishing his wares to enhance their value. He said the London auctioneers had advanced him a little money with which he was to patch up the house here and there with plaster or paint, to wash and polish up the old furniture, and set it about in the rooms to the best advantage. It was apparently for the sake of economy that he undertook this work himself. Lawless reported with disgust that he spent hours in the house, helping to lug about the furniture and carpets. The bailiff appeared to be a cabinet-mender by trade; the woman swept and scrubbed. Once or twice, when we were driving in the neighbourhood, we met Girdlestone in company with the man and woman. Helios would not recognise him in any way.

Mr. Carp could detect nothing irregular in the proceedings of Girdlestone's London creditors. They were not highly esteemed, but there was no legal flaw in their action.

He had seen Girdlestone's sister, and, to his surprise, had found her alert to what was going on, almost as if she had heard of it before he told her. She was eager to give her consent to the sale of the whole property. When the first mortgages, contracted in her father's time, had been paid off, half the remainder of the money realised would be hers,

and she was determined upon paying her brother's creditors.

It was so uncertain what the forced sale of the property would bring in that it was not much use discussing her share; but Mr. Carp was indignant on my uncle's account; so was Lawless.

The lady was very ill — actually in a dying condition—but her mind was perfectly clear, and her volitional powers, Carp said, stronger and firmer than they had been earlier.

We heard immediately after this from Mr. Newberry, who had also gone to see her, and sent a similar report. He wrote that she seemed happier than ever before. She had shown him a box containing, she said, her will and all other papers of any importance to her affairs: it was to be sent to him at her death. Whether the assurance she felt that all things were now proceeding in the right way was justified, no one could tell; but since she was ready to sign any deed of sale, the sale must proceed.

I could see that Helios, at least, was heartily glad to hear that the dying woman was happier. I know that her sorrow had weighed ceaselessly on his mind. He was thankful, too, that the affairs of the Girdlestone family should be wound up, and their name pass away from our corner of the earth.

All that now perplexed us in Girdlestone's proceedings was his eagerness to make the most of the property for his creditors. There was no explanation of this. It was in vain that Carp and Lawless exerted themselves to find out something more

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about his reported marriage or the whereabouts of his boasted wife and children. He would give no further information, and asked for none from them. He was content with Carp's assurance that he could have his sister's signature, without even a question concerning her condition or whereabouts.

CHAPTER XI

THE ETERNAL ROMANCE OF SPRING

I REMEMBER that it was just then that the first crocus of the year appeared. It seemed to blow a blast from its little golden trumpet calling me to bestir myself on behalf of the coming flowers. I set to work to gather the fallen honeysuckle leaves that lay on the Alpine snowdrops, with the severe reflection that the white, drooping things were each more beautiful than a pearl pendant. After all, it was better to let the beautiful incident of the maiden and the pearl rank with those beauties of Nature that come and go unbidden, and from our point of view unexplained, but bestow on us, in the passing, exquisite delight, and leave with us joyful memories.

Only a year before, a missel thrush had come to visit in our old poplar tree that stretched one arm across the open heavens. The brave practising of that bird's song in the winter's dawn and evening I shall never forget. When all other birds were silent he piped away till, one morning, while soft drifts of rain crossed the level glow of the sunrise clouds, that one pretty silver bird showered down

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upon us such mad music of joy and hope that he fairly woke us up from sleep. A flock of hard-headed, practical starlings actually rose from their low covert and perched on his tree spell-bound, listening all through the red-brown hour of dawn, and the finches and blackbirds began their first soft twitters and whistles. But they never caught up with him. They had weeks of practice to go through; and all that time, even on the stormiest day, he sang and sang. Oh, the hopes and the happy dreams that he shook down on us! Then, too, pretty boy that he was, he had a happy humour and rollicking laugh that even larks lack. A missel thrush is the only bird I know that can unmistakably sing the letter D; and when in the garden the knees of my trousers and my hands were covered with earth, this speckled seraph, who had come out of nowhere, we knew not why, would cry in rapturous notes: "Dirty! dirty! dirty!" It was his noonday joke, and I knew it was aimed at me. Then, quite suddenly, when we made sure there would be a lady missel and a nursery in the poplar tree, he was gone. Where? Why? We asked in vain. Spring went on without him; we had other songs, other gains, other losses. Would the missel thrush come back this year? Clearly it were folly to try to divine.

Then, too, one winter we had the flickering of the northern lights in our starlit spaces. It came, faint streaks of primrose or snowdrop-coloured light, night by night; then failed; then suddenly on a frosty midnight it flickered to the zenith in rosy shafts—

once seen, a joy for ever. But Aurora never came again at midnight to flush the jewels in Orion's belt and flicker fire on the sides of the Dipper and strew the Milky pathway with the rose-leaves of some high angel's festival. Long I had watched for more ; but now I had ceased to expect a second heavenly accident.

Then why not take the maiden and the pearl in the same temper? All the devising and divining in the universe would not have brought them to our door. Why not leave them in the hand of that ever-bountiful future which, if it never brought that girl's face to my eyes again, would certainly bring a thousand other lovely things?

Ah! my philosophy was flawless; I reviewed it and admired its sweet reasonableness; but, all the same, I felt that all the other lovely things in creation were as dust and ashes compared with the sight of that face again.

It occurred to me to remember that there had been two maidens and two faces. I was aware now that the other maiden might remain hidden in some inscrutable recess of fate and I be none the sorrier. She had been as beautiful, and the more fragile and disconsolate of the two; and yet, as I patted and trimmed the mosses of the snowdrop bed, if not into order, into some admired disorder, I knew very well that having done what was reasonable to find her and relieve her distress, I had no wish to carry my compassion to unreasonable lengths for her. But, oh! I wanted very much to see the other girl again. She had struck me as precisely the right sort of person to

fit into a variety of occupations—a most desirable chum. I could not think of her face without perceiving that she would have liked my present occupation; would have laughed to see me kneeling on the bass mat with the terrier on one side of me and the mastiff on the other; would have liked to see how many of the snowdrops had provided themselves with collars and petticoats of last autumn's skeleton leaves by pushing their small, intrusive heads right through the leaves which were thus lifted to the rank of frills and furbelows. Terry and Master were good friends to me, but they were always solemn over my garden operations. Then I thought how much she would like sowing the seed-pans, and I went at once and got out the seed-pans, and proceeded to wash and arrange them to be ready for the February sowing, with a heart that was light and gay because, in some mysterious fashion, I had leaped from desire to expectation, and had an idea that she would be there to admire the seedlings in some stage of their growth and to gather the flowers. So I went on merrily whistling as I worked until, after a good while, the voice of reason chid my happiness, and my mood changed, for I knew that my hope had no foundations.

And yet this mood of hope and expectation returned betimes next day, and carried me over a happy hour or two till it was lost again, and so on through the days. There is a phrase that to some minds sums up this sort of thing. A while after I chanced to hear Mr. Quack use it; I knew that it must be about me. He said: "Calf-love!"

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I believe it used to be the fashion for all young men to go through a stage which this expression was coined to describe. It was, I think, at a period when a boy who had no passionate love for Latin verses had nothing whatever to feed his mind upon, and bodily sports were little known. At any rate, the phrase is out of fashion now; and I wish to explain here, although it goes beyond the province of this story, that I was never in love but once in my life; and if it began early it lasted long and grew steadily, as all good and beautiful things must grow if they have any life in them.

I think perhaps I had better also explain here that, although I am going to tell a ghost story, and Helios says it is a pretty one, I am not one of those scientific people who make a study of mental freaks, nor have I ever seen message or messenger from the spirit-world. If I know what ghosts are, I suppose I believe in them theoretically; but if they are what most people think, I am sure I do not believe in them at all; neither does Helios. Indeed, when I look at the face which is most beautiful to me, and is at this moment to be seen in the sunlight on the other side of my room—a face all brown and rosy and brimming over with fun—it makes me laugh to think that it ever was mistaken for a pale, intangible thing. And moreover, when I look out of the window, and see certain roly-poly babies—cheeks like brown, open-air peaches, fists and knees mottled, like the hearts of our dear red cabbages—frolicking with Helios, I feel that I can quite cheerfully relate all the preliminary puzzles and adventures of the story

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I am telling. The babies are at play, serious and strenuous—play which makes me hope they may grow as good as Helios. He—bless the heart of him!—has merely attempted to come in to his day's work, and is hindered in his stride across the daisies by a fat pigmy clinging as for very life around each leg. They can only clasp him below the knee; they cannot talk plainly; but their love has a quality that makes them, breathlessly groaning and grunting in their present exertions, hold on in sober strength, in spite of Gulliver's laughter. Again the crocuses are all ablaze, and the soft spring wind is blowing.

Certainly, on the day I took out the seed-pans for the spring sowing, whistling as I worked, the thought never entered my head that any girl, least of all a beautiful girl, would ever marry me. If my heart was singing, then and for years afterwards, I was as unconscious as the birds are that the name of the song was love.

CHAPTER XII

THE SECRET EMISSARY

THE garden in February is the most alluring of toys for a man perforce idle. I had devised a very ingenious method for getting early flowers among our winds, planting in all the southern nooks of our shrubbery. The roots of the shrubs in these nooks had to be dug and cropped every year, and I put all sorts of delicacies in the soil for the flowers to feed upon. I bought the delicacies in bags—horrid-smelling bags—from people that make or bake them.

As Hudson had plenty of work of his own, and did not at all hold with new methods, I found Evans a more agreeable helper in the garden, until I had to give him up because of the way things had of behaving under his attentions. Evans was of the south country, Hudson from the north of Ireland. I would not be understood to generalise; I am merely speaking of Evans, who was much more amiable than either Hudson or I. After I had set him to dig up a border—to "clean" it, technically speaking—it was perfectly marvellous what came up in it next spring. Everything that had been there,

and ought to have been rooted out, seemed to have received a new lease of life; and instead of growing in tidy clumps, these things were dotted over in fine besprinklement; and as the new things that I had put in were not intended to harmonise with them, these borders, if not unbeautiful, displayed a mad and riotous beauty of nature. Nature can certainly put the most extraordinary colours together with successful temerity, but even Helios, who always felt, although he did not show, the large indulgence of the sunshine, blinked when rare majenta wall-flowers and orange crocuses blazed side by side, and pink tulips were encircled by wreaths of marigolds. I do not like modest flowers; I like them to be glorious—it is entirely to please Helios that I waste time over a violet bed or a snowdrop patch—but the more glorious things are, the more careful one has to be about rival glories. Thus, for example, if one had a dozen sunsets to arrange with good effect in a landscape, as very likely the angels have in other solar systems, it would require altogether more care than the grouping of the delicate waxen things that many people admire so much in Easter gardens.

So the autumn before this story begins I had looked about for a better digger than Evans, and a more pliant helper than Hudson; and this leads me to tell of the Portuguese mariner, whom the vicar's wife supposed to be a papal emissary and in league with the French nuns.

I had discovered, in talking to our neighbours, that this Portuguese who had been so unlucky as to marry the female farmer was badly off for pocket

money. He could not publicly go out by the day to work, because his wife required all the labour he had to bestow upon her land. His only respite from her slave-driving—and I confess he seemed to snatch a good deal of respite—was when he was out fishing, or too feeble, by reason of his bodily ailments, to work. I gathered from the few soft sentences that he had learned to say in English that there were times—and I should judge from observation that these times were almost all the time—when he felt obliged to explain to her that he was not well enough to plough or dig or go with the cart, when, in reality, he would have been able to do these things had he seen any prospect whatever of personal gain by their accomplishment. The pathos of his dark eyes, and the wave of his grizzled beard, as he made this confidence to me, begging my honour not to mention it, I shall not soon forget; and when one comes to think of it, how truly sad was the plight of one who must tell lies in order to escape a life of unremitting and unrewarded toil.

When I proposed to him to come at odd times and do my bidding for the sake of sundry coins which would purchase tobacco and other desirable luxuries, he was greatly pleased, and I found that his bodily ailments did not prevent very thorough and artistic manipulation of the garden beds under my direction. The only difficulty was that his visits were stolen. He would appear at dawn, or in the gloaming, or come for hours in days obscured by fog, or, if he knew a task was waiting for him, would come running, hiding in the centre of a sudden scud of

rain. When he had had no work set him, he would hover about among the trees within sight of our window, like a shade in Hades, until I could go out and cheer him up with a few congenial words and coins. Even Helios, who was severely moral in the matter of people supping the broth they had cooked for themselves, spoke kindly of this shy and reticent sinner, although he never allowed him to see his indulgence. The man himself was afraid of Helios, as most people were; but the dogs liked the man, which was a good sign; they would even escort him to his own house, a mark of high favour.

That week I had him into the front ground to plant out the pansies which I had sown the previous autumn. They were to be a golden bronze colour, and ought to begin to blaze away soon after leaving the nursery bed, so that I would not leave them there after February had come in. For the last month the Portuguese had not had much work with me, so he was more talkative than usual in the pleasure of renewing his care of the flower-beds.

What had he been doing in those winter days when he did not feel able to work with his wife's farm hands? His eyes were as innocent as a child's, and he raised them to me without a hint of shame as he declared that, when too much out of health to do hedging and ditching, he was always able to row the holy sisters across the tide, which, as he explained, was too strong for their unaided oars in the winter winds.

"They can't pay you much," said I; "they are so poor."

Yes, that was true, they were vowed to poverty ; but it was also true that they made succulent soup and stews out of blood-coloured beans and lentils brought from France—lentils that were not like the bad peas his wife bought and cooked with pork—bad pork, salt pork—but of a fine colour, like the half-open flowers of the pansies he was planting. And ah ! with what flavour did the holy sisters cook, with a bouquet of herbs, and onions only rubbed on a crust. For if, indeed, the saints in heaven could look down upon the handfuls of salt and the whole rank onions which were the only flavouring his wife knew, they would become sick—indeed, the saints would become sick if they could but smell these things.

“Doesn’t she put in pepper ?” I asked.

I had, indeed, seldom seen the woman, for she was in every sense of the word a housekeeper ; but every one knew that her disposition was peppery, and when I found he did not understand my jocular allusion to the pepper, I went further than was polite and explained the joke.

“Pepper !” he sighed. “Ah, heaven !” But my honour would not speak of pepper when a fire caught the fat, and all was burned up in an instant—all that was within compass. Would I call it like the wholesome seasoning of pepper when a cat suddenly was attacked in front ? No ; fire was the word, as if the kettle boiled over and sparks flew out at the same time. This I must know to be the case with a cat, even a young child cat. What, then, with a woman that had a nature as of many cats, or as of the powder one puts in guns which, when touched

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quite unintentionally by a spark from a man's pipe, does not wait with patience to hear whether he intended harm, but returns an evil answer very suddenly!

I bethought me that for the last month the Portuguese had had two fellow-sufferers if the dairy pupils from the convent had found themselves able to remain.

"What about those apprentice nuns?" I asked. "Are they still learning to make butter, and do they get scolded very much?"

I remembered afterwards that he seemed so much occupied in his work that I had to repeat my question before he answered it.

Yes, he thanked my honour for inquiring. Two members of the convent still made butter at his wife's house. It was necessary that she should regard them with more respect than it was possible for one of her nature to regard a mere husband, because, behold, the holy sisters paid for their food and for their learn 3. If now he—he himself, unfortunate that he was—had had the wit to be a lodger or a learner at the farm, paying with what he earned on the boat, no doubt he would not get so many hard words. My honour must mark it well that it was better not to marry, but to remain in an independent position.

Even Helios had expressed curiosity as to how this strange marriage had been conceived and arranged, so that this allusion to it naturally drew my imagination away from the last question I had asked. It was only later on, when he was about to

flit home again in the dusk, perhaps taking the village on his way, though it was a mile out of it, just to show he had not been where he had been, that I again remembered the unfortunate novices. I thought it well to inquire as to their appearance and behaviour, although I had but small hope of hearing anything bearing on my puzzle. So, in our English way, I asked the Portuguese, point-blank, what they were like, and what their ages were; but soon discovered my mistake.

How should he know? Were they not about to be holy sisters? Did they not wear the veil? Could a good Catholic regard a face that was veiled? He seemed sufficiently scandalised to be reproachful. What did I take him for? It was even pathetic to see how he desired to clear himself, not without dignified reticence, of so bad a fault as I had credited him with.

But having talked with him on other matters, I had an inkling how to gain my point. Allowing it to be understood between us that I had been wrong, and that he had not observed the features of the damozels beneath his roof, I repeated to him, as a piece of humour, what the rector's wife had said about his deep-laid scheme for the conversion of the English race—of the wreck he had compassed and the crew he had drowned, and the convent of the French sisters as a result of his machinations. I related all this rather wildly. I had never seen the man smile, and had no reason to suppose that he would take such dire imputations mirthfully, but I wanted to bring in that part of the story where the

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novices were to convert his wife, thinking that, by telling him that Lady High Feather had her eye upon them and knew their age, appearance and qualifications, I might gain some further information.

But, somewhat to my surprise, the poor Portuguese was more alive, if not to the humour, at least to the odd contrast between his real situation and the influence attributed to him by the lady. He took off his hat scratched his hair, which was thick—soot colour streaked with white—and gave forth various soft expletives which I took for Portuguese. Then he held out the palms of his hands, turning them upside down, to show how little the influence attributed to him was his, and then asked, with what seemed some real interest, whether I was sure this was why the wife of the Protestant priest had come to see the novices on their arrival, or had she, in truth, another reason.

I gave it as my opinion that the wife of the Protestant priest wherever she went spoke her mind without fear or favour. Then I deftly repeated the description she had given us of the dairy pupils—how that one was almost middle-aged and the other younger, and that both were strong, squat, hard-handed, working women; and I added one or two touches that I thought he might resent sufficiently to contradict.

"Ugly," said I. "Oldish, dull."

But the description seemed rather to gratify than repel him. He answered with some vigour and brightening of visage: "Ah, heaven, yes!" I was right to say the priest's wife spoke the truth. For

himself the veil was enough ; he did not look to see what sort of woman wore the holy frock ; but had he been the English priest's wife and looked at them—yes, that was what he would have said : " Oldish, ugly, dull." And that she should think they might convert his wife ! He prayed the holy saints that it might be so, but he had his fears.

So he went away, and I felt that I had, at least, disposed of another possibility, not that I had ever thought that my maidens could have worn the religious dress, but still it was just as well to make certain, for one must examine into seeming impossibilities when that which appeared impossible has proved a fact.

When I repeated this piece of delicate detective work to Helios he explained, with some diffidence—he was always diffident about boasting—that he had been to the farm some time before on the same errand, and seen the agreement signed by the nuns on behalf of the dairy pupils.

" Did you see the novices ? " I asked.

" No," said he, " they were out with the cows ; but the account given of them in the indenture was quite clear enough."

CHAPTER XIII

THE STRONG GO HUNTING THE GHOST

THE day after I planted the pansies our sleepy village was ablaze with the tale that the North Hay ghost had reappeared. Girdlestone himself had run in the middle of the night and arrived breathless at The Bell, waking the household in his determination to be taken in, and saying, without concealment, that he was overcome by terror, and that nothing would tempt him to remain in North Hay again after sunset. The man who was supposed to be bailiff, care-taker and cabinet-maker all in one, with his wife, had reached the farm on the other side of the park, and with less clamour and more civility had firmly insisted on receiving shelter, on the ground that no respectable person could stay in the same house with things that had better not be mentioned.

All this came to our door with the early postman, and every tradesman who came that morning brought the same tale, with additions and embellishments.

"You're in luck, Alice," said Helios. "You're in great luck. Not only one first-class romance, but two."

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I looked at him rather wistfully.

"My liege," said I, "you couldn't possibly add them together, could you? It would relieve the mental tension; it would relieve it very much."

"Have I not said it?" replied he. "One and one make two."

"I meant, could you not make it a sum in fractions for me, and say that two halves make a whole? If, by some piercing ray of insight, now, you could assure me of that, I should feel less as if my hair were being rubbed the wrong way. To stand between two real live puzzles at once is like standing in an interrupted electric current—prickly, very prickly; I would rather unite the wires."

Helios actually meditated.

"No," said he; "the wings even of my fancy fail. I cannot conceive of any possible connection. If there is one person on earth who may be said quite certainly not to possess valuable jewels, and not to fling them about, and not to have kith or kin who could be described as you have described your maidens, I should say it was Ralph Girdlestone; and as to the ghost tale, I was only bidding you enjoy it while you might, for I have no doubt it is a bubble easily pricked."

By this time it was about noon, and we saw Mr. Lawless opening the front gate with his hunting crop.

"Do you think he has come with the pin?" said I.

He rode up leisurely between the euonymous shrubs, and when Hudson had taken the horse, he came in at the French window.

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"Has the ghost brought you?" said Helios.

Lawless sat down, looking annoyed.

"I have thought from the first that Girdlestone was playing some game—you know I have."

We both assented without demur to his statement.

"Well, now, what do you think?" said he, looking up as if a flood of new light had been thrown on the situation, and Helios must have been forced into a new set of opinions; and yet, when we questioned him, we found he was only referring to the tale I have told; and even as to that, he could add nothing to the postman's information, except that the man we called "bailiff-curator and binet-maker" had got all the keys of the house, and was camping for the day under the front portico.

Girdlestone had been to call on Carp before Lawless came out to us, and had stated that he had seen enough to frighten him badly in the dark, but that he was not such a coward as to be afraid to go into the house in daylight if the caretaker would only unlock the doors.

"What did Carp say to him?" asked Helios in amusement.

"Well," said Lawless, "Carp, you know, is very nice about that sort of thing. What he really said to Girdlestone was to get out of our place; that, as he had not consulted us, we were acting now only for his father's creditors—and—his sister. But the way Carp said it was really fine. He sat there making notes of all that Girdlestone had to say; then inquired: 'And what, Mr. Girdlestone, did you and the bailiff and the bailiff's wife have—ah—have

for supper?' Another suggestion was, 'May I ask, Mr. Girdlestone, what—ah—money do you expect to make out of this singular story?'"

We laughed because Lawless mimicked little Mr. Carp's mincing tone; but he resumed his business expression, and added:

"And that's just what I've come to ask you, Mr. Ferguson, what does he propose to get out of it?"

"How should I know!" cried Helios. Then he added: "But it was rather too bad of Carp, because we all know that he himself fled, and in the daytime, not three years since. Did you ever get out of Carp what it was that alarmed him?"

"Oh, yes," said Lawless. "There were some bad-looking men in the house. Carp saw them through a glass door, and thought it better to come back for the police. The police found them gone, but discovered that they had got in by the scullery windows. There were tracks of feet outside and inside the window, and tracks by the old boat-landing. Some tramps had evidently borrowed or stolen a boat, and camped in the house, whether for one night or much longer we could not tell. We had the window boarded up. Carp, of course, is not a strongly-built man, but he naturally did not wish the public to know that by returning for the police he lost the culprits. He ought to have told you."

"I don't see that he was under any obligation to explain it to me," said Helios.

"That is a point on which we differ," said Lawless. "Girdlestone is no doubt trading on the picturesque version of Carp's discomfiture current in the village,"

he continued. "But my question is, why? The house will not fetch a higher figure with a more recent ghost as an encumbrance, nor, on the other hand, would such a cock-and-bull story deter any serious purchaser, if Girdlestone has repented urging on the sale. He is no fool; he doesn't come running to The Bell in the middle of the night, pretending to shake with fright, and blurt out his pretended discomfiture, without some object in view. One thing is clear—that fellow he's got there is in league with him. It was not badly done. The man's wife, who is a poor, stupid sort of creature, is still at the Home Farm, and he has arranged for her to stay there. He declares she shall not run the risk of returning. They appear to be a sober, decent couple, and his care to protect his wife from the apparition has taken the fancy of the neighbourhood, also the fact that neither of them will say what they saw or heard. The propriety of their behaviour is, I assure you, giving great status to the ghost."

"But," said I, "four months after Mr. Carp was frightened, and had the windows boarded up to keep out tramps, there were lights about the old place at night."

"Yes," said Lawless, "we know that, time and again, the place has been entered, but we can't make out why. Whoever went no doubt caused the ghost tales, but that cannot have been a sufficient object for going."

We had had an experience of our own which we had taken care not to add to the village repertoire. Helios explained that as we drove home past North

Hay late one night we certainly saw a light that was not a reflection from any natural object. My impression certainly was that someone was moving about within the north rooms and carrying a candle. The light only showed in cracks and chinks here and there, as if through closed shutters.

"But why didn't you tell us?" asked Lawless indignantly.

I forget what Helios said in reply, for, whatever it was, it only meant what he so often intimated in one way or another, that rather than assume a personal claim to the property of the lady who was supposed to be his wife, he would have let the broad lands of North Hay slip into the river without betraying the slightest interest.

In whatever way he remotely referred to this sentiment, Lawless took it up more warmly than heretofore.

"Believe me," he cried, "you are making a mistake. I am just on the track of proof that Roy was not alive at the marriage, and the settlements were such—"

Helios threw up his head in a way he had which always effectually silenced any of us whatever we were saying. Lawless stopped in the middle of his sentence, and then added :

"Well, when I get the proof, Mr. Ferguson, you will be obliged to admit that it was to your interest to put a stop to any robbery at North Hay."

"It certainly would never have occurred to me," remarked Helios, "that there was anything worth robbing at North Hay that would not need either a

cart or a barge to remove. The mud on the bank fortunately prohibits barges."

"The trouble is," said Lawless, "you never know what there may be in an old house like that. Carp has taken care to admit, in confidence of course, to every talkative person that there is nothing in the house but broken furniture; but there's a good deal of carved wood, and old brass, and some cracked china, and even old linen carefully stored where no one would be at all likely to find it."

"And the lost Spanish dowry?" said I.

"I wish to goodness that were included. We should have a chance of being better paid," sneered Lawless. "But as regards the goods in the house, Carp, who knows pretty well what there is, has never missed anything. Yet there have certainly been traces of people getting in at times. We have sent down the police more than once, but we can discover no motive for these irregularities, and nothing so far accounts for the game Girdlestone is playing."

"I have supposed," I began—"that is, I have several times thought that Mr. Girdlestone's energy in the house-cleaning line might be the last flicker of hope, born of despair, in the Spanish lady's treasure—in fact, that he might be hunting for it. Is there any trace in the family papers of its value, or what it consisted in? or is it all moonshine?"

"Her marriage settlement is among the papers we have," said Lawless. "Jewels of great value are mentioned in it; we don't know positively whether they existed except on paper. They are not mentioned in any subsequent document; if they ever

existed, they must have been disposed of by her husband before he made his will. Indeed, his heirs accused him of squandering his substance."

When he had been polite enough to answer me, he went on to the practical present. He explained that the first certain result of the latest ghost story would be to draw all the adventurous spirits in the neighbourhood to the North Hay grounds at night. It must be part of Girdlestone's plan to get a crowd there in the dark. He must either intend to produce some ghost and enhance the excitement, or to take advantage of the excitement already kindled to steal something. Carp, acting in the interests of the sister, was sending the police down to keep out trespassers.

What Lawless really wanted was that Helios should go with him and a couple of policemen to the house at night, enter it unknown to Girdlestone and the caretaker, and spend the night there in the hope of catching Girdlestone in any trick he might play.

"We can get in without their knowing," he said, "for Carp can keep Girdlestone and the man busy with something at The Bell or the farm while we go to the house. Carp has kept the cellar keys."

At first Helios would not hear of going. Looking back, I can now see, with regard to his marriage, that what hurt him most was what most men in his position would have desired to believe — the idea that he was free to marry, that he had never really been married at all. It was his disposition, when in doubt, always to assume that the contrary of what he

wished was the fact, and to act from that point of view ; and as he always assumed he bore no relationship to the Girdlestones, I conclude that he wished to believe his marriage valid.

"All that I ask of you," said Lawless, "is to act according to the knowledge that you and I alone have of Girdlestone's criminal character."

I heard them arguing this point as a man hears the arrangements for a festival in which he may have no part. It was only sometimes that the weight of my lameness fell upon me. I rarely thought of it. Never except when it rose up and struck me a rare and unexpected blow, did I allow myself to dwell on that epitome of folly, the idea that what is not might have been. But this was one of the occasions when sorrow seemed to catch my throat and strangle me. In the course of my life I have wanted many things with all reasonable strength of desire, but I don't think I ever wanted anything more passionately than to go into the big, lonely house that night and watch for ghosts or villains. Think of the wild delight of it ! To sit in stifled silence in empty, mouldy rooms, clutching a dark lantern and listening to cautious footsteps that creakingly approached. I could not ask them to take me ; no one could have been a greater drawback to their plans than I ; and so bitter was the sense of this that for a time I felt stunned by distress.

Helios objected to taking policemen into the house. He held the belief that the police were a gossipy, idle set of men. At last he agreed to go, and to take Hudson and Evans, who were both

stalwart and faithful fellows; and all their plans were made, even to the arms that they should carry.

I took my papers and went to work in the cold office in which Helios played the magistrate when he had to play that character at home. It was a room which opened off the brick hall to the left of the front door. Its window was not in front but on the west side and shaded by hollies. This gave it a cold, greenish light. A cold, greenish oilcloth was on the floor and a green safe in the corner. Why are safes painted green? and office tables covered with green leather?—such green as is the invention of brutal persons who have never even observed the cheerful hue of grass or turnip tops, to say nothing of the verdure of spring. I had told Helios from the first that that office was a place to hang oneself in. Then Mrs. Prince put up a calendar on the wall, with the saints' days in red letters; and a *Graphic* supplement would have been added if I had not bribed Hudson to humbly crave it for the stable wall, where it still cheers the mare and the eight-year-old and the filly. There was nothing more in the office except a few chairs and two oak forms. I sat there that day hard at work until I was as bad at heart as the unnatural greenness of the bare surroundings could make me.

Helios also was busy. My sorrow never occurred to him.

After our evening meal, which we took at six, he had the men in, and told them briefly what the lawyers suspected and what he had engaged to do. He had a way of carrying people with him after first

discovering their own notions about the business in hand.

Accordingly he proceeded to ask: "What is your idea, now, of what the squire may be at?"

Hudson put the back of his left wrist behind his head; he always did this when he wanted to differ from either of us.

Evans, who was much more ready at conversation, spoke first.

"I'm thinking, sir, that you and Mr. Lawless—he—I gather that he thinks that the squire and the bailiff weren't, so to say, alarmed; but that they only said they were, being as they might be hatching a plot to take things away before the sale."

Evans said this slowly, with an air of profound meditation, as if he were culling ideas from a mass of confused evidence, whereas Helios had just explained these things with perfect clarity of language.

Helios nodded encouragement.

"Yes, sir," said Hudson, taking up the word, "that is what you did say. Evans—he puts it quite clear. Well, sir, where you go I go. I've never been afraid of anything yet, as I know—not so far as to keep clear of it. I don't believe in the dead any more than"—he sought on the ceiling for an adequate figure—"any more than them as says what the weather's going to be; although if I have to deal with them as walks, sir, I'd rather they was men."

This last was a dark saying. Helios nodded, evidently pondering.

"As to being at hand and ready to do what mortal can," chimed in Evans, "of course, sir, your orders is

enough; and if it's a trick it'll be the best sort of sport to catch them as is doing it—if male. But as to the squire and that other man hoaxing deliberate, I think the lawyer's hout. If you ask my opinion, sir, I think the lawyer's hout."

Evans always used the false aspirate by way of emphasis, so that it was evident he thought Lawless very far from home.

"Do you mean," asked Helios in surprise, "that you think, from all you hear, that Mr. Girdlestone and the caretaker were really alarmed?"

Both the men answered with steady respect, "Yes, sir."

"They were scared, sir, deep down in the centre of their being, like," Hudson added solemnly.

Then Evans, always the smoother tongued, tried to modify the contradiction.

"As to squire, sir, you and the lawyer may know more about the likes of him; but the bailiff man, sir, was frightened right enough. He was more frightened than his wife was, and that's a fact."

"Which, sir," added Hudson, "came of it being female. How can a man tackle a thing of that sort if it's female?"

"Hobviously a female!" interjected Evans.

Hudson, his fist again against the back of his neck, went on:

"For, sir, even if he think maybe it's all in 'is eye, he can't strike at it with his fist to make sure, for if he did that, which would you say was the most awkward fix, sir—to find it a lady, or a blood-curdlin' thing of the grave?"

Helios sat apparently considering this dilemma with solemnity. I knew from the way he bit his lip that he was waiting to make sure of his own gravity.

"Well," he said at last, "it's evidently our duty to go and see if it's there again to-night, and what it is. We couldn't ask the lawyer to go alone. If you'll have the trap ready, we'll meet him at the place we fixed."

They went out quite cheerfully, pleased enough with the adventure now that they had relieved their minds; and when they had shut the door Helios said lightly:

"I suppose it has turned into a pallid nun or the Spanish ancestress since morning. I wish you were going, Alice; you could people the dark corners for us with white maidens. By-the-by, you were wishing just now, were you not, that our private particular and the North Hay story could be turned into one. If we find your white maidens, and bring them home to you, you'll be quite set up."

I did not blame Helios much for this; but I cannot speak lightly when I think of the misery of seeing them drive away. Oh, there were surely few things that life afforded so absorbingly interesting as the vigil they were going to keep! I could see that the spirits of the men were up. I wondered whatever it could be like to be as old and cold as Helios, who I believe would gladly have stayed at home. But that I reflected, must have been pride; nothing but that odious quality could cause one to make light of such an opportunity.

Then I made a forecast of the night. I saw them

in the long, unused rooms of the north side, amid memories of proud, hard men and stately women. I saw them turning their lanterns on old pictures, and singling out one of a dark-eyed, sad-eyed, lonely Spanish wife decked in such pearls as I had found, and with the gleam of a long-cherished, furtive purpose of revenge in her girlish face. Then I saw them sit in perfect darkness on some staircase; I felt the thrill given by the first far-off sound of coming feet; in thought I listened, as they were about to listen, and saw—what would they see? A sordid trick—a brutal artifice to represent a lost and wandering soul? or a criminal merely intent on theft? or—and for some reason my mind seemed to pierce through the cobwebs of conventional expectation, and I felt certain that if any strange, ghostlike, feminine thing had really been seen at North Hay, it must have to do with my sad maidens—nay, it must have been one or other or both of the delicate forms I had seen. And I should not be there!

As Helios drove off with the two men he called back that Hudson had forgotten to shut the glass houses; so when I had stood in the soft, foggy darkness for a long while, and the last sound of their wheels had passed, I turned to go into the back garden.

But as I went I was overwhelmed with the storm that broke upon me from within, the cry of "I—I—I the sport of a miserable fate! I standing alone at war with the universe! I overwhelmed with the knowledge that life was worthless!" For I ave

observed that any grudge when indulged has the power of merging itself quickly in all imaginable distress, and arraigning Heaven for injustice and earth for barrenness.

I went mechanically down the dark garden path to obey my uncle's last orders, but before I got to the glass houses I stopped upon the grass that grew under our apple-trees, and threw myself down and beat upon the sod with my fists. I do not know how long I lay there, saying wicked words and panting out anger and despair. At last I realised that I was very cold, and that my head seemed bursting with the blood that surged in it; and then I began to weep, and went on shedding tears because I knew there was no one to see.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CHASE IS NOT TO THE SWIFT

IN the calm that comes after every storm I began to take up my responsibilities again. First I remembered that to make myself ill with the chill that had crept over me was a shabby sort of trick to play on Helios; and second, that I had left the house door open, which was not very nice for Mrs. Prince, who was now the only inmate. I reached for my crutch, and began to gather up my numb body from the ground. The momentum of my uncle's last direction was still upon my muscles, if not upon my mind; I was set to go and close the glass houses before turning in. The moon had now struggled above the thickest fog banks and was making the white, shifting mists luminous; the ground under the bare apple boughs was bright and the boles cast a shade; then the place was dimmer, the light diffused in every particle of suspended moisture that floated past. I had been lying near the long vinery; when I got myself upright, obliged to pause until my bones limbered out enough for further movement, I looked at it to see which windows were open.

Now the moon and I were both on the same side

of the glass, and the mist was both inside and out. Anyone who has tried to look into a glass house under these conditions will know how illusory are the lights and shadows and forms of things within. I was not, indeed, trying to look inside, until, all in a moment, I found myself staring intently between the vine stems. Within the glass I saw a face looking out at me—the face of a girl—the sad face which had haunted my heart ever since I had seen it at the door on the windy night three weeks before. She seemed to be regarding me most wistfully ; I thought I saw her shadowy form, but because of the glamour and the young vine leaves and the dew upon the glass, I only saw it very dimly. Perhaps she had wiped the dew off the small space of glass through which she was looking, or perhaps her face, being the only thing printed clearly upon my imagination, was a creation of eyes inflamed by weeping. I was conscious of both these possibilities, but I was not in the physical condition to brave the excitement of the sudden delight, and also the fear which that superstition we all inherit from a primitive generation now bred in me. My heart seemed to stop beating. In a few moments I was possessed by another fear—that I should faint there all alone, and fall in an ignominious heap under the very sight of those wistful, eager eyes.

I did not faint. I found myself, in what seemed a minute's time, still tottering upright. There was a trembling and dissolving of lights and shades within the glass ; a dim figure began to recede against the wall shadowed by the vines, and I, summoning all

my strength, was swinging myself down the path that led to the door at the other end of the building. By the time I got to the door and looked in, the place was empty.

I stood at an angle of our wall, between the doors of three glass houses — the end of the long, low vinery, a higher house that ran at right angles, and my own small, glass flower-house that stood out between the two. The moon was shining on them all, and particularly was the light glamorous upon my little conservatory, which had tall, flowering plants on its shelves, and hanging from the roof fringes of pale wisteria, out of which the moonlight washed all colour. I thought for a moment that I saw, inside this tiny palace of flowers, a girl in white drapery, as I had seen her first; but when I looked again there was nothing there but flowers and moonlight. Close by was the door in the wall that opened on the common. To go to the door and throw it open was a minute's work. I was too much excited to notice, as I ought to have done, whether it was unlocked or whether I unlocked it.

I looked out. The open, misty, moonlit ground lay without shadow, except such as was caused by the moving vapours and the rise and fall of the grassy ground. At some distance two dark figures were trudging across it. They might have been men or boys, or possibly women, for all I could see. They were dressed in long coats, and walked holding their heads downward against the sea mist. The course they took was the ordinary path from the village to the high — 1.

I called out "Hie!" at the top of my voice; but my voice was thick with the tears I had been shedding, and what current there was in the air was against me. Still I called out several times. I thought they might have heard; one of them did indeed look back once. Then I perceived that, while they were in light, I was in the shadow of the door, so that, had they tried, they probably could not have seen me.

I made myself shut the windows of the hot-houses before I returned to the house by the front door. On seeing the office door ajar, I remembered the connection between the apparition and the precious pearl in my uncle's safe. The owner must have returned to look for it; but if so, why had she gone away without asking for it?

As I entered the house the door of Mrs. Prince's room at the back of the hall opened. Mrs. Prince did not scold; she did not ask any questions. She said in her very nicest voice:

"You know, Mr. Alec, you did not tell me you were all going out, and you left the door open. Someone came in about twenty minutes ago, and there are footmarks on the floor."

Terry and Master had been shut into her room to keep them from following the trap. They came to meet me as Mrs. Prince crossed the hall with a lamp in her hand. She showed me that from the front doorstep into the office there were such wet sand-marks as we always brought in on our boots when we had walked over the dunes.

"That's all there is to be seen," she said, "for I've

looked all round. There's no harm done, and whoever it was must have been a friend, for Terry was lying on my door-mat with his nose to the crack, and he whimpered, but never once barked. I only came out because I heard the door shut. Will you be good enough to go into the dining-room, sir? I happened to be making new cordial to-day, and there was a little of the old left, so I put it out for you—you always like it."

She locked the front door and whisked into her own room again.

I found a big fire in the dining-room, a kettle on the hob, and the cordial on the table. It took me some time to think out the thing that had happened. Why had Mrs. Prince concluded that the footmarks were not mine? Then the conviction seized me that when she found the tracks she must have come out to the garden to look for me, and had discovered that I was in trouble. I was physically comforted by the cordial, but when I realised that my dear visitor had come to the house and I had been absent, no words can tell how deeply I regretted my wicked passion of discontent. It is wonderful how clearly we see a fault when we see what we have lost by it. What had I not lost? It was evident that the owner of the pearl suspected that it was in the office safe. Perhaps the pearl was gone. A little knowledge of safe locks, a few implements, were all that would be needed if a false key had not been obtained. All this, in my imagination, was easy to one who could watch a lonely house as closely as ours appeared to have been watched in order to take advantage of the

first hour in which it was neglected. I soon felt sure the pearl had been re-captured, and feared that I had for ever lost the means of knowing whose was the face I had seen to-night.

I thought about the expedition to North Hay, and tried to work out any possible connection. Had the tale of the ghost of North Hay been invented to lure Helios and his servants out of the house? But this seemed too far-fetched. Yet, turn and twist things as I would, I was more and more conscious of one thing, that the girl had been sad or frightened, or both, and longed for help of some sort.

It did not seem to me at all proper to go to bed that night. Helios was keeping vigil for ghosts or criminals: why should I repose on an ordinary spring mattress, when a criminal, or something very much more dear and beautiful, had been within our walls, and might now be not far off? It was more suitable for the Beast whom Beauty had visited to spend the night by the fire than between sheets that smelt of lavender.

I remember putting a sofa cushion on the mastiff's sturdy side for a pillow; that is all I remember until, between six and seven in the morning, I heard Helios and the men knocking at the door. It was still dark, but there were glorious lakes of orange light bordered by banks of cobalt hills above the eastern sea, and the black outline of our broad-armed poplar tree was just seen against the glimmering dawn.

Helios and the men were in the sort of humour which may be expected in humans who have lost a

usual night's sleep and had nothing to eat. They attacked a round of beef on the pantry table, and Helios expressed greater displeasure at not finding me in bed than I thought the circumstance warranted. He threw himself down and went to sleep, while I, rendered repentant by my folly of the previous night, quite gloated over the tact I had displayed in not expressing any curiosity whatever as to the ~~urn~~ things had taken at North Hay. At a late breakfast I learned that they had, in fact, taken the most annoying turn possible: Helios and Mr. Lawless and the men had spent a night of great discomfort in the old house, and had seen and heard nothing whatever. Girdlestone had drunk himself to sleep quite early that evening at The Bell, and had lain like a log there all night; the caretaker had slept in the barn at the Home Farm, while his wife had had a bed in the kitchen—they too had slept. A good many people had come to North Hay gates early in the evening, in the hope of seeing lights and apparitions; but when told that no one was allowed to enter, they seemed to have retired again in civil and sleepy contentment.

"It was a most idiotic business," said Helios. "As far as I can gather, Lawless misread the thing all through, and our men were right. Girdlestone and his man did see something that they took for a ghost—in fact, they say that they met a lady in the great ball-room, which is shut off from the house. Girdlestone thinks that he recognised some relative."

"Was she young?" I interrupted eagerly.

Helios paused to look at me with a certain

narrowing of the eyes which I knew to mean that he was wondering whether I would ever have any sense.

"Really, Alice," he said, "I never asked whether she was young or not; but if you like I'll telegraph at once to inquire."

"Well, tell me all you know."

"They seem to have been up rather late—some say mending furniture and some say playing cards—but they heard a girl sobbing. They ran into the ball-room, which has so far been shut up, and saw the apparition I have mentioned. Girdlestone shrieked out the name of someone—I don't know who precisely. I have no doubt myself that they had both been drinking."

"I wish you had stayed at home," I said; "for I am sure that the pearl has been taken."

"Good riddance!" said he.

"No; but I'm in earnest," said I.

"Nonsense!"

"I stayed out in the garden a good while after you were gone."

"Why did you do that?"

"I can't explain, but I did. It was a still night. I stupidly left the front door open, and when I got to the long vinery I saw the same girl who came here three weeks ago."

Helios laid down his knife and fork, and looked steadily at me.

I proceeded with my tale to the end, not enjoying the recital much, for I thought he was incredulous.

"What makes you think the pearl is gone?" he inquired.

"The girl was here the night it was left; she was here again last night. It is evident that someone has been watching to find the house unguarded, that someone knew where the pearl was kept. What possible object could anyone have in going into your office, and standing about the safe, if not to try to get back the lost property?"

Helios, as usual, put his finger on the weak place in my argument.

"Perhaps to try," said he; "but although the safe is only a common one, the opening would require time and strength and skill such as a girl would not have."

"I saw two people walking away, believe me, at least, was a man. She must have a confederate."

"There is nothing easier than for us to look in the safe," said he.

So we both left the breakfast half eaten and went into the office. Helios opened the safe with the key he kept on his watch-chain. I looked on despairingly till he drew out the private drawer, and there lay the sealed packet just as we had left it.

I could not help laughing, although the laugh was against myself. It was not the ending that ought to have capped my story, and it was a satisfaction to me to find that the one proof of the reality of the maiden was still in our possession.

Helios was ironical.

"Shall I unfasten the packet?" he said; "or are you satisfied?"

I expressed myself as perfectly satisfied.

"But if there is any supernatural agency at work," he said, "the jewel might be withdrawn without the seal being broken."

"If you have any doubts," said I, "you had better look, but I do not believe in witchcraft."

Helios closed the safe. He looked at the sand on the floor, which Mrs. Prince had left to tell its tale, and very small was the tale it told.

"It would be the big dog, or one of us, that brought this sand in yesterday," said he. "Mrs. Prince would not see it till she brought in the lamp." He added: "You're not looking well, Alice; you're really looking quite ill this morning. Come back and finish your breakfast."

He warmed up my bacon by holding it to the glowing grate.

"I never heard," said I, "that bacon was a cure for incipient insanity."

"The trouble with you is that your wits are rather in excess of your physical strength. You look jaded. Have you caught cold?"

Now my long bask on the hearthrug and the timely cordial had done away with the worst effects that might have followed my last night's chill, but my head was aching badly, and the tears which had no doubt cleared my mind of bad humours seemed to have left the weak places in my bones ready to cry out with every jar. What seemed the incredulity of Helios as to the evidence of my sight increased my depression.

"If you don't believe me," I cried, "go and

ask Mrs. Prince. It was not I who told her that someone had been in your office ; she told me."

That Helios was concerned was proved by the fact that he went into Mrs. Prince's parlour to speak to her. He and I both detested an interview in this room ; it always made Mrs. Prince extraordinarily complimentary, and eager for compliments in return. She would flatter us, and say small things deprecating herself, her appearance, her work, which called for flattery. It was, as Hudson had once remarked to me, "the nature of the woman" ; she was made that way. I can endorse Hudson's criticism of Mrs. Prince, looking back dispassionately upon past years ; but Hudson used "the woman" as a generic term, and in those days I was so inexperienced that I believed him, only cherishing the belief that there were somewhere in the world one or two exceptionally angelic creatures who, out of compassion to the strong dislike that Helios and I had to the usual sort, had been made for us on a different plan, and would some day appear in the dissolving vistas of our future.

Who will say that such a hope, deliberately cherished, was at all sane ? And yet I venture to think that, had I been able to explain it to Helios in all its bald absurdity, he would not on that account have sent for the doctor. I doubt very much whether he, wisest and best of men, did not cherish some idea very similar in his own breast.

But all this has nothing to do with what happened that day. I had real cause to rail at justice because, spite of having given a perfectly truthful account of

a thing which was not in any way my fault, and having acted, in the difficult circumstances into which an apparition always throws its subject, in what I still think was a quite level-headed way, Helios sent Hudson to town to bring back Mr. Quack. He did it, indeed, before he went into Mrs. Prince's parlour, wrapping me up on the sofa, and putting my crutch in the umbrella stand. This was a horrid insult. Then, when he went into Mrs. Prince's room, I heard him actually shut the door behind him.

"Now for it!" thought I. "If he has sinned against me he will suffer. How she will bridle her head, and simper and gaze at him with her brilliant eyes! He might as well roll out his compliments handsomely of his own accord, for he'll have to pay them before he gets away."

But when he remained a quarter of an hour I became concerned for his safety. To what idiotic condition she might reduce him in so long a time of purgatory I could not tell. "By this time," I said to myself, "he must have tasted all the new jams, and faltered out concerning each the awful falsehood that no one could make them so well as she; he must have heard the tale of how work roughened her hands, and been obliged to admit that they were still white and shapely." To what further straits he might have been reduced I hardly dared to think, when at last the door opened, and he returned.

I eyed him with compassion tempered with severity.

After a minute or two, to show that his conversation

had not been entirely concerned with so trivial a matter, he said :

"It looks as though someone did come in last night, Alice. It could scarcely have been any of our friends, for they would have looked into the rooms we use. But it must have been someone the dogs know. Terry was on the mat in there, and the mastiff near him. They would have barked at a strange footstep. It is odd, too, that whoever came did not wait to make inquiry; but I daresay we shall hear who it was."

"Have you tasted the new jams?" I asked. "Have you explained that there is nothing you like so well as a quiet chat in her own apartment?"

"No," said Helios. "You're out this time. She did not ask for a single compliment. She mellows with age."

Then he sat down to his desk and began his day's work, and I turned my face to the wall. I was deeply hurt that he should have accepted Mrs. Prince's testimony after, as I thought, rejecting mine.

CHAPTER XV

'THE KNAVE BEFOOLED

I HAD nothing against our doctor except that he was a doctor. Why anybody, man or woman, should wish to concern themselves exclusively with the physical ills of life I could never make out. I suppose they are useful, just as the men who dig drains and graves are, just as butchers and sportsmen are useful; but all these things seem to me to betoken bad taste and a low degree of intelligence. So strongly did I feel this that I was indeed amazed every time at finding Quack so nice a fellow.

I knew very well that Helios, who had taken a turn round the grounds, and by accident, as it were, intercepted Quack at the gate, had given his own version of my condition; so I felt as helpless as a thing in a trap while Quack held my pulse and went through all his professional byplay, remarking on the weather and other things.

"Did the governor tell you I had seen a ghost?" I asked, after receiving most of his remarks in silence.

"Have you been to North Hay?" he returned, choosing to think my question jocular.

"Did the governor tell you I had seen a ghost?" I repeated, with stern insistence.

"Have you seen one?" asked he.

I repeated my question a third time with strong severity.

"No; he said that you were out of sorts and out of spirits, and that he thought of taking you to town for a few weeks."

At this information my heart sprang into resistance, and a feeling perfectly unknown to me until that hour, a feeling of protection for someone more weak and unfortunate than myself, took possession of me.

"Look here," said I, sitting up; "don't let him do that. I'll tell you exactly what the matter is if you'll say that I must stay at home."

"You certainly haven't vouchsafed to tell me much so far."

I told him, with elaborate truthfulness, that I had lain for an hour on the damp ground in a bad fit of ill-temper.

"And now," said I, "the only reason for exile must be that my uncle thinks that events are too exciting for my fragile constitution, or that there is some sort of a person about whose influence over me is bad. As to the first—"

Helios, who had taken occasion to give some directions to Evan in the lobby, came in now, but I was far too much in earnest to be interrupted.

"Consider what a tendril you would be developing to face the bitter blasts of the world, if the events at Lone End — think of it — Lone End! could be considered too exciting. As to the last supposition,

it is ridiculous. If to feel pity for a girl in trouble is harmful, why do we still profess to admire the ideals of chivalry?"

Helios listened to my oratory, as did Mr. Quack, with the most careful attention. The latter answered:

"You refuse to go to town because you think that this pretty-faced gipsy might return for the third time?"

Helios interposed with surprise:

"Have you really been telling our private particular to a man so devoted to gossip?"

At this they both laughed, for Mr. Quack was a person of stern discretion; and, to my annoyance, they neither of them discussed my objections further, but diverged upon general topics.

Mr. Quack prescribed a tonic, and as he rose to go, said to Helios:

"He thinks that you suppose him guilty of seeing things that are not there."

"I wish to goodness the things he sees were not there," said Helios grimly.

Then they went out. They might have talked all day in the hall and I could not have heard a word, but they stupidly walked out together, and as they passed the window I heard Helios say, in that low tone which often carries much further than a man's ordinary voice:

"Yes, certainly—a girl of some sort."

And then Quack used the phrase, not worth repeating, that I have before referred to.

There was nothing on earth that I enjoyed so

much as the London theatres. I lay still for the rest of the day docile to every alleviation suggested for my aching bones. I was so well amused balancing the advantages of a visit to town, and the delightful thought that if I remained I might afford help to her who, according to my uncle's own dictum, was certainly a girl of some sort, that I did not insist upon quarrelling with anyone. At length I realised the painful and annoying fact that I could not choose both advantages. It is ever thus. I never have a guinea to spare without enjoying in anticipation everything that a guinea can buy, till I perceive in disgust that I must give up everything else for one thing.

In this debate my conscience spoke out quite distinctly. It said: "Stay! Stand by the girl now. The play is a glorious amusement, but you have never before had a chance to give it up for anyone's sake. It is true that, even if you stay, you may not have the opportunity of doing any good, but if you go you'll lose all chance of it. She must come again some day for the pearl, and only meet with insults at the hands of the servants."

The next day, when Helios revived the subject, I told him what I had heard through the window.

"Did Mrs. Prince see her," I asked severely, "that you are so sure of her existence?"

"Mrs. Prince saw the figure of a girl go down the sweep. She followed, as she thought, as far as the gate, but evidently, from what you say, the young person must have slipped into the back garden. If it were not for the necklace, I should think that

some village woman had taken to crazy wanderings; but, curiously enough, that is not Mrs. Prince's belief. She thinks that the girl was of gentle birth, tall, although hardly more than a child; and further, she felt sorry for her. The figure seems to have awakened her compassion."

"You never told her that I saw them before?"

"No, no; I didn't. None of the servants have heard a word about that. That is what makes her corroboration more telling. But of course, you know, child or not, she has no right to come here; and I have no doubt that if we went away she would cease to come."

"Cease!" said I. "She has only come twice in three weeks, evidently in trouble both times. My conscience will not allow me to go away."

"There will be an interval of weeks before you are of age," said Helios, "and my conscience tells me that you need a holiday."

As it was, the choice was not left to us; or rather, something occurred which made Helios averse to leaving. We had a visit that morning from no less a person than Ralph Girdlestone.

He came swaggering into the room where we sat, with a great effort to appear at ease.

He asked Helios for a private interview, whereupon Helios, who would not otherwise have thought of it, said that he preferred to have a witness.

"You don't treat me much like a brother-in-law," sneered Girdlestone.

"I think it was on your evidence that I discovered that no such relationship existed between us."

"Then," retorted he, "what right have you to have brought my sister down here? Carp tells me that she is still near London. You can't make me believe that, you know, for I have just seen her."

"When?" said Helios, "and where?"

"That's my business; but it's not so far away that you need make any pretences."

I saw my uncle's eyes contract as they did when he was much more interested than he cared to show.

"What business, anyway, have you to try to keep her whereabouts secret from me?" added Girdlestone.

"None whatever," said Helios. "Her affairs are in the hands of Carp, and of Newberry, who first introduced himself to me as your messenger."

Girdlestone grinned as he remembered the time and cruel manner of that introduction.

"They are all acting under your instructions," replied he.

"Under hers," said Helios.

"And you are acting under hers—acting as a receiver of stolen goods."

"Whose goods?" asked Helios, unperturbed. "Not yours, as you are in the bankruptcy court."

At this Girdlestone broke out into a whine, and declared that his sister had tricked him cruelly, and that every one who was in league with her against him should be made to rue the day—the sort of maudlin talk not uncommon with a man of drinking habits.

After we had endured this for some time, Helios told him to leave the house, and added:

"You need not suppose that I do not know that you

have been travelling in certain places lately under my name, or that I could not have you arrested now under suspicion of worse things. If you start a report that your sister is going about secretly in this neighbourhood, I shall find means to silence you very quickly. If you want to get through the bankruptcy court and get your discharge, have a care that you don't mention her name outside this house, and that you don't come here again."

Girdlestone tried to fall into a rage. He declared that during her tenancy of North Hay his sister must have taken many things out of the house, that my uncle must have received them, or known where they were or what they had sold for. He boasted that he would enter into a lawsuit to recover the property if we would not give an account of it.

Upon finding that this threat had no effect at all and did not even evoke interest, he pretended that he only intended it as a joke, and made elephantine overtures of amity, saying that he would be content if Helios would swear that he had never received any of his sister's property.

I became very angry, and wanted to tell him, in withering words, all that his sister had cost Helios first and last; but Helios evidently felt no desire to bandy words with him. I do not think that this was because he had not the natural impulses of indignation against the Girdlestons that the rest of us felt on his behalf, but probably because he had felt them so fiercely and so long in earlier years, had so deliberately planted his magnanimous activities in the very soil from which these flame-weeds sprung,

that he was now living in a more summer-like stage of things, like a garden plot fairly well filled with flowers in which weeds are not very rampant. I think this horticultural figure expresses what good books call "overcoming."

He told Girdlestone, with but slight emphasis, that the will-o'-the-wisp which had lured him to Lone End had no existence in fact, and dismissed him.

"But has he really used your name lately?" I asked.

"Quite lately! The agent Lawless employs sent us, not only entries in hotel registers, but cards which he had left on various people—"

"With your name?"

"Name, and this address."

"But why?—where?" I cried.

"We don't know why. As to where—it was in Louisiana. This agent tells us he did it in certain places where, ten years before, he had registered his own name at the hotels when he was looking for the children who died. It is the district where the yellow fever was worst, where it recurred three successive summers and, like the black plague, killed off whole families."

I went on to suggest that Girdlestone's statement that he had seen his sister was worthy of heed.

"Why should he say it, my liege, if he did not believe it?"

"Why should he be the fool that he is?" retorted Helios, in anger. "He never had a well-balanced mind, and he has so fuddled it with drink that nothing he says is worth notice."

"But one reads of strange accessions of strength that come to the dying—perhaps Mrs. Roy—"

"Stop!" said Helios.

He got up and walked out of the French window. I saw that the ground on which I had hitherto been shy of venturing was forbidden. He would discuss all other members of the Girdlestone family, but not her.

He walked about the shrubbery. The south side of every group of shrubs was bordered by a bank of my sprouting flowers; I thought him well employed looking at them and listening to the chirping of the birds; but I was soon sure that he was doing neither, for he came in for his hat and some telegraph forms, and went off to the village.

I believe it was so painful to him to suppose that anyone could for a moment think that the lady he had so long protected might be doing what was undignified or eccentric that he would not lose an hour in making sure. Perhaps, too, unallowed by himself, he had the hundredth part of a doubt as to whether she might not be in the neighbourhood and needing care.

Next morning he showed me letters which settled all question as to the lady's whereabouts. She was able to sit propped up at her window, which opened on the Surrey hills, but was not fit for more. She was attended by the kindest of nurses day and night. The doctor's wife, who wrote a more detailed answer to my uncle's telegram than her husband had time to send, was evidently attached to Mrs. Roy, and mentioned that the only solicitude the patient

showed was about an American friend who had come to see her a while before, given great pleasure by her visit, promised to come again, but had not been heard from since.

Helios made no comment on these letters to me, but his heart was evidently lightened by renewed assurances of the lady's cheerfulness.

CHAPTER XVI

THE NUNS AND THE SPANISH LADY

IT thus happened that, having threatened Girdlestone, Helios decided that he must stay at home to carry out his threat if needful. It seemed that Quack—odious fellow—had directed (what business had he to direct?) that if we did not leave home my crutch was to remain in the umbrella-stand for a day or two, and that my papers were to be put away for a week.

Having nothing to do but meditate, my ideas had need to be diverting. The pearl and the maiden still held the field.

"My liege," I cried, "the Spanish lady from the convent!"

"Well—what?" said Helios.

"The Spanish lady with the French nuns! and the Spanish ancestress! and—" I paused for a moment and then added wildly, "—and the pearl!"

"Well," said Helios again, with provoking calm, "and Mrs. Prince, and our terrier, and the moon."

I broke in excitedly to stop him.

"Girdlestone came here to accuse his sister of

stealing from the house with your connivance; it looks as if he knew that something had lately been taken. It is the pearl he has missed; and you have received it, in spite of your lofty denial. The Spanish ancestress when dying perhaps wrote the whereabouts of the treasure to her relatives in Spain: on seeing the advertisement of the sale a descendant came over—our Spanish friend: she found the hiding-place: she took the pearl."

Here I stopped breathless. There seemed to me a good many missing links in my tale.

"Well," said Helios, "but what about the French nuns, and Girdlestone's family in France? And do throw in the Portuguese sailor—he has such pretty brown eyes."

"My liege, you will say that the girls I saw were both young, and the Spanish lady was old—but there was a likeness. That is what I have just this moment remembered — there was a likeness."

"If you had discovered it earlier, when you did not happen to be trying to weave them both into the same romance, I should have more faith in your discovery."

As for me, I could think of nothing else to say except to repeat doggedly: "There was a likeness."

But my suggestion had at least this effect, that Helios had the dog-cart out, and we proceeded at once upon a delightful expedition through the chirping woodlands of February to the bridge near the town, and thence, doubling down the

other side of the river, to visit the convent and seek the Spanish visitor.

When we got to the boundary of the nun's farm we found that it had been roughly fenced all round and the gates padlocked. Any rude person could have vaulted over, but, as I have often observed, in this world manners are a great impediment.

To avoid gossip we had come without a groom. We drove round the outskirts of the farm till we saw some sisters cutting cauliflowers in a field and hailed them. 'The one who came to us turned out to be the elderly, and what might be termed the commercial, sister who had been the spokeswoman that first day when they came to Lone End to obtain our good offices on their behalf. She unlocked a gate for us quite willingly, inviting us to drive to the house and have a glass of cider. She said the Spanish lady had left some time before

"How long?" we asked.

The only suspicious part of her behaviour was that she seemed to have forgotten exactly when her *pensionnaire* departed.

"Was it a week ago?—two weeks?—ten days?"

"Longer than that," she replied.

She offered to go in, if we liked, and look at the records; but it was a long way to the house, and all the cauliflowers in that field must be cut that day to send to market in the evening. For herself, she charged her memory only with what was bought and sold. Would we not drive to the house and drink the cider? Perhaps if we tasted it we should order a cask.

We drove on to the house. The sister in charge there was the most gentle and delicate-looking of them all. She was quite old, and was either vowed to silence or could not speak any language we knew. She brought out the cider, and handed us a price-list showing on what terms we might buy it in bottles or casks.

Helios grew stern. He demanded to see the Spanish lady as if he believed her to be still there.

The house sister became frightened. She shrugged her shoulders; what was more to the purpose, she offered us the visitor's book.

There, under a date about a week earlier than we had first seen her, in a neat, old-fashioned, copper-plate hand, we read the name, "Madame Maria Rodriguez, *pensionnaire* from America."

Helios pointed to the word "America," explaining in French to the sister that he thought the visitor came from Spain. But she only shrugged her shoulders in a deprecating way, entreating us by gestures to look through the house, as if she thought we had some suspicions about the establishment.

Nothing was easier than to look through the house. All the windows were open; all the doors were open; the bedrooms kept for *pensionnaires* were on the ground floor, and wide open. Intent upon selling her cider, she showed us the cellar where it was kept. There was such obvious frugality and poverty about the whole establishment that Helios could not resist laying down a gold piece on the dining-room table.

The visitors' book contained only the dates of

arrival and the terms agreed upon for pension, that being, apparently, all that was necessary in order to claim what was due upon their departure. It was impossible to form any judgment as to whether they had reason for concealing the length of the Spanish lady's visit, or whether their whole mind upon the subject was as open to us as was the house to the sea breeze. It is obviously quite possible, although to the average British mind incredible, that a parcel of hard-working women may be perfectly downright and straightforward, even though they are Roman Catholic nuns.

When we drove out again the person whom we now termed "the talking nun" let us out of the gate with as much good humour as if we had bought all the cider in the cellar. There were eight women working in the field beside herself, all in the black outdoor balloonish habit, the full round hood and cape. The novices showed a coarse white skirt below. Helios remarked that their numbers had increased by two, upon which she declared they were all of the same French Order, and, thinking perhaps that we suspected her of concealing the Spaniard, she called upon her labourers to turn round and salute us, which they all did with great readiness and good-nature, Helios and I taking off our hats in considerable embarrassment while the eight women curtsied to us amid piles of cauliflowers. They were near enough to be seen; there was not a face among them that arrested our attention.

The confessor of the farming sisters was a priest who officiated at a small Roman Catholic chapel in

our market town. We drove to his house, and found him in, and asked for news of the lady who had offered to instruct us in the Spanish language.

The priest was ready enough to state that she had been at the convent some weeks before; he supposed she had not been there since, for she had not been to confession or mass. What was there more to say? She was a Mexican, or else, if Spanish, she had gone out to Mexico, and there married a man of the name of Rodriguez. She was not a widow; no, she was to return to her husband very soon. The husband was old; he had a cattle farm, and it required her management.

Why had she come here? we asked.

The priest shrugged his shoulders. He said we must be aware there were many things that women did not tell to the priest. He had no means of knowing what she did not tell him; he had enough to do to attend to his own people. He understood that she had come abroad for her health—a change had been ordered, but she could speak French better than English, and when she heard of this French-speaking convent, had come on here. No doubt Signor Rodriguez was old, and she, if not young, was still lively, and wished to see the world. When she left here she went to London—at least, she had said that she would go to London. If she had left an address behind her he would be happy to procure it and send it to us. We were very kind to take so much interest in a stranger.

We went to an inn to have bread and cream and jam—an excellent combination. I felt much

exhausted, and even Helios had a worn and tired look. It was so exceedingly annoying and ridiculous to have this tale of sailing from Mexico, like Girdlestone and his family, turn up again, just when I thought I had a nice, safe Spaniard who might be armed with a family tradition about the lost dowry.

Now Helios prefers damson jam, and I prefer gooseberry, and we both like our favourite jam at inns better than when Mrs. Prince makes it. When I had quite peacefully ordered damson for two, Helios knew that I was out of spirits and expressed sympathy.

"She can't be Girdlestone's wife," said I; "and she can't possibly be his children; and it's perfectly ridiculous to suppose that she could have come from Mexico at the same time and had nothing to do with him! To crown all, she came and lodged here, in his vicinity!"

"Yes," said Helios. Then he said: "Have some cream." After that he remarked quite cheerfully: "I really cannot see why our time and valuable mental ability should be taken up with them."

But I went on making remarks. I made a great many that obviously suggested themselves at this juncture of affairs. I perceived that I must give up the connection with the Spanish ancestress if I believed in the connection with Girdlestone. I suppose that I went on turning and twisting the various ragged ends of possibilities in a monotonous way that was annoying, for Helios suddenly announced that if I gave another thought to the matter, he would send the pearl to the nearest police

office and write a full description of all that had befallen us for one of the London papers.

There are times when one has to deal very softly and gently with Helios, so I said no more, and plied him with jam and cream.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BURGLARY

WE had a letter from the priest to say that the Spanish lady had her letters forwarded from a bank in London when with the sisters, but they had not remarked the name of the bank, and she had left no address behind her.

We lived with entire dulness and sobriety for a few days ; then, the day before the North Hay sale was to take place, what we termed " the burglary " happened. The appropriateness of the term will at once strike my readers when I have explained the upshot. I look back to the delicious excitement of that burglary as the beginning of the sunshine of joy which entered Lone End and has remained there ever since.

It was a misty night in the second week in February. Before we went to bed the dogs were lying in the hall, and both remarked to us that someone was approaching the house. Terry expressed it by a short, sharp bark ; when I opened the sitting-room door just to ask about it, he and Master were both standing with ears alert, and there was a soft rumble, which seemed to come from somewhere under-

ground near where the mastiff stood, which meant in his language the same thing as Terry's bark.

"Well," said I, "out with it—friend or foe?"

"It will be someone crossing the common," said Helios. "It is the sort of night when the mists carry every sound."

It was twelve o'clock; we were reading late. I opened the front door to welcome a friend or speed a passing traveller, but I could see or hear nothing. The dogs brushed past me and ran out down the drive; but as soon as I had shut the door they scratched to come in again, explaining that it was all right.

Helios raised his eyebrows at them both. "I told you so," he said.

They neither of them could endure to have him lift his eyebrows at them. They walked to their beds in the hall in high dudgeon. The only treatment that was worse, in their estimation, was to be laughed at.

After that we went upstairs. Helios still occupied the large room in which I had also slept during the first years of my life at Lone End. I had a room separated from his by a passage, but with the same outlook over the sea to the south. The windows of both rooms opened upon the slanting roof of a porch that sheltered the door and the sitting-room windows below. The pillars of the porch were covered with honeysuckle and jasmine and clematis, a fine old blend of ancient stems and new tendrils all twisted together. I had always regretted before that night that we had not planted

rambler roses—a new variety then—but I never regretted it afterwards.

I remember very well that I sat up reading till my candle burned out. Then I opened my window to take my usual survey of the night. I noticed how very dark it was; there was a sea mist, that smelt sweetly salt; the stars, no doubt, were out above it. As I listened I heard the wind rise, a distant moan, an irregular note sung to the soft, regular ring of the waves, and next the shutters of the west side voiced the concussion, and I felt the stream of air. Our winds often rose suddenly on warm winter nights, and bustling past us, left all still again.

I was thinking, as I often did, how very nice it would be if we were a large family, a lot of nice people, old and young, in the house. In my heart I always upbraided Helios for not having married the right sort of person, for the right sort of lady would have had sisters and cousins, and perhaps even a nice grandmother; and then there would have been kids too—all which appeared to me a very cheerful conception of what might have been. It was a dream that dangled itself before my eyes, and the queer thing was that I always had a hankering belief that Providence, some way or other, would supply the deficiency. I was specially occupied with this sort of idea just then because I was determined that, as soon as the poor lady in Surrey died, I would insist upon Helios contracting another marriage, and of course it was extremely interesting to decide the sort of wife I should like him to have.

I heard a sound, and saw, in the dimmest light of

night, our mastiff come into the middle of my room. My impression was that his ears were up and his tail was up, that he looked alert and pleased. He had the trick of opening all our doors, but did not usually walk about at night. Then came a flicker of light outside my window ; it was only a flicker, then the cool dusk again, but in the instant's light I saw the girl I had seen first at the front door in the storm, and again in the moonlight in the vinery. Every line of her figure was photographed upon my mind ; I could make no mistake. I also felt sure that she had seen me reading, and seen my light go out.

I did not move. I am quite willing to admit that I may have been too terrified to move, but I'm not sure that I was not simply too amazed. She was near, and moreover, she had a very resolute intention of coming in. Then again, the reason I was still may have been more prosaic than either fear or wonder, it may have been bashfulness, although I knew so little of the ways of girls that my bashfulness had no definition.

At any rate, she, having taken in the situation, softly slipped over the sill. She whispered to me :

" For the good God's sake, keep still. If you have any kindness in you, or any wish to help us, keep still and say nothing."

Her voice was like a child's voice, and she added, with naiveté :

" I saw you crying the other night. I have prayed God ever since that you may be happy, so you ought to help me." Then she added again, with a baffling

The Spanish Dowry

change of character: "Will you lie low for five minutes? Promise!"

I eagerly gave the promise. I am aware that I showed myself utterly childish in doing so, but I gave it. I watched her as she made a gesture to the dog, passed through and closed the door, leaving the dog and me in the room.

My heart began to beat fiercely against my side. My unruly body seemed panic-stricken by sheer astonishment, and I had promised to remain still for five minutes! I had no means of computing the time. Then Master's behaviour struck me. Why on earth should he flop down on my floor with his head up, as he always did when either of us told him to wait till we returned?

Would that five minutes never be over? I would rather have died than break my promise, although I knew now that I ought never to have given it. I heard Helios suddenly bound to his feet. He always slept with door and window open. He slept soundly, and I knew by the bound that he had awaked with a start. I felt convinced that he had caught the intruder. I got hold of my crutch and opened my door. Helios was standing alone in his doorway.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I think you'd better strike a light and put on your dressing-gown," I said peevishly.

"Were you in my room?" His voice was sharp.

"No," said I.

The wind had come in another gust. It throbbed at the windows which made it impossible to listen for the girl's step

I went out into the passage. Helios came out of his room again.

"My watch and chain are gone," he said, in brief indignation.

He had a candle in one hand, an Indian club in the other. He had sprung half-way down the stair before I could speak.

"Don't strike," I cried. "It's a girl!"

I remember how he looked as he glanced up at me, the candle flame held just in front of him. He was dressed in blue pyjamas; I always insisted on his getting them blue, because of the colour of his hair. He wore an old scarlet dressing-gown, that he loved and I hated. He looked as magnificent as a Burns Jones angel, his yellow hair tossed over his head and wrath written on his face.

Then it occurred to me what a target he must be for the pistol of any wicked confederate of the girl who might be standing below in the dark. I swung myself down the stair with some idea of protecting him; and both dogs, catching my excitement, tumbled after and tripped me up, so that I fell against him and was only saved by his strength.

Then we were both in the lower hall, and I was picking up the candle, which had fallen over the banisters.

"The safe!" I said. "The safe!" But Helios had gone into the dining-room, where the silver was kept. There was nothing he was accustomed to value in the safe except papers, which no one would steal.

The hall fire still gave out a red glow. I thrust my candle into it to light it. I went to the office door, but found it locked in the inside. Then I knew where she was.

Helios made a hasty circuit of the other ground-floor rooms. He had shouted to summon Evans, but Mrs. Prince appeared first at the back of the hall.

Then Helios turned upon me, holding his candle full in my face.

"What did you mean by saying it was a girl?"

Had Mrs. Prince not been there I would have told him who it was, but I would rather have died by inches than have confessed before Mrs. Prince that the girl had been so beautiful that I had allowed her to pass through my room and steal the watch. It was that theft that was like a lump in my throat and a weight on my heart—that she, she of all people, should steal!

I stood dumb before him. Evans came, armed with a gun. The dogs lay quietly down in the fire-glow on their mats.

It was the woman amongst us that noticed this detail.

"Gracious goodness! sir," cried Mrs. Prince, in a voice that was half a scream, "Look at those dogs! This is no work of man, sir."

"Don't now, don't be alarmed, Mrs. Prince," said Evans. "There's nought shall touch you, ma'am."

"What is not the work of man?" asked Helios sharply.

While they were both hastily admitting that they

had neither seen nor heard anything, and didn't in the least know what they were talking about, I slipped into Mrs. Prince's sitting-room and threw up the sash that was abreast of the office window. Here, on the west side of the house, night was almost black. I could see the window, and beneath it the laurels and a holly hedge; I could just see their outline and no more. Then I heard what I expected to hear—the spring bell on the office window, and saw what I expected to see—the girl jump lightly out of that window. She was dressed in dark clothes.

At the same moment I heard Helios and Evans unbarring the hall door. She could only go round the corner of the verandah, where she would meet them.

I leaned out breathless, to hear the meeting of Helios and this adroit and beautiful thief. He would be very angry. I listened, but no sound of the meeting came to me.

In a minute Helios came round just where the girl must have met him. He came to the open window of the office and looked in.

"My liege—" I cried.

He put up his hand to stop me, for he was listening.

I, too, heard footsteps, heavy and cautious—not hers, certainly. That excited expectation I can remember yet. The shrubs were tossing; the soft night wind rustled. I knew from the way the girl had gone that if she had not met Helios she must be hiding under some thickset hollies; escape between his corner and the front door was impossible.

It was only a few moments ; then the author of the cautious footsteps appeared on a path from the yard. It was Hudson in his shirt sleeves ; he was lighting the stable lantern as he walked.

If only a confederate burglar had appeared they might have caught him and been content ; but now there were three men seeking for one girl.

Already my mind had swiftly made up her story. She was in the employ of some hardened burglar ; she was forced to steal ; the pearl had, no doubt, been taken from some richer house than ours, and she had thrown it away at our door because she could not endure her employment. Her employer had treated her so cruelly that she must dare anything to recover it. To this intelligent view of her case my mind had leaped by the time Helios had discovered Hudson. Evans, who had been left watching the door, now came round the verandah.

I called out in fear :

" My liege, don't hurt her ! She is just under the hollies."

Evans took the lantern, and threw the light around and under every shrub. Terry came sniffing curiously and aimlessly about, as if to find out what we all wanted. Helios stood out upon the sweep, holding the mastiff by the collar. No one could pass by on that side. Hudson was on the path near me, stooping with eagerness, his knees apart in the attitude of a man at a wicket waiting for the ball.

There was no ball ; there was no girl ; there was no burglar. I am telling the truth ; I cannot alter it to make the story go faster. My impatience was

nothing to that of Helios and the men, when the last shrub had been examined.

Hudson gave a snort. He and Evans began leaping into the office window, running round the house and about the garden paths. Helios went back into the house; I heard him making a thorough search in every room, while I still hung out of my window to watch, because we had all heard the bell on the office window ring and I could not give up the idea that where I had seen the girl disappear, there she must reappear. The case was absurd; there was absolutely no means by which she could have got away.

When I at last drew in my head, I was disconcerted to find Mrs. Prince sitting in the room watching me. She was dressed, as usual, in a black gown, and I could not help observing how nice she looked compared with the rest of our party. I was half-conscious for a moment of my hair tangled over my forehead. In an instant I forgot it again when Mrs. Prince said:

"Mr. Alec, if, as you say, it was a woman, mark my words! it was that poor young thing that came here the other night. If you took note of the dogs, you know that. And I'll believe no wrong of her. It's my woman's heart, Mr. Alec—the heart of a mother that's in every woman—that tells me there's some mistake. She's a lady, every inch of her. Men are easily mistaken about women and girls, but a woman knows at a glance."

Heretofore I would not have given Mrs. Prince's certificate of gentility a moment's heed, but now

she rose immensely in my esteem. She, like the dogs, had sat down quietly without resenting the unwarrantable intrusion. But then I reflected that she had not heard of the theft of the watch.

Helios called me in a tone that did not admit of delay. He was very angry with events, as was but natural. Now was the opportunity to tell him all I knew, so I blurted it out, knowing that there was no help for it. He was standing inside the door of the empty office.

"She isn't there," I said. "I saw her get out of the window. She went round right into your arms; she must have brushed past you. She came in first at my window. Yes, she is the same girl."

Helios raised his eyebrows, which offended me almost as much as it does the dogs. He was standing like a statue of glorious colour, holding a lamp.

"Can you be a little more lucid?" he said.

Then the sense of what I had already said became clear to him. He motioned me to come into the bare, grim room, and set the lamp on the table.

"What do you mean by saying she met me?"

"She must have done."

Just as I spoke my heart gave a bound of relief. I caught sight of a welcome object, a link of a well-known watch-chain, peeping out from under a newspaper on the table. Yes, there they were—the watch and chain, apparently thrust hastily into temporary hiding. Two keys that hung upon the chain, and a seal that had been my grandfather's, were as safe as ever.

Helios looked at it as if the sight were but small alleviation of the case.

"Try to collect yourself," he said to me, "and tell me all that you know."

"It must have been the key of the safe she wanted," I cried. "She has opened the safe. How can one tell all one knows when one's knowledge is growing every moment?"

The safe had certainly been opened, because, when we tried it, the door was simply shut, not locked. There was some disorder of the papers most easily accessible. Helios opened the drawer where the pearl had been, and there it was still, or at least the packet unbroken.

He shut the safe with a bang.

"She was disturbed before she got the pearl," I said. "She has risked all this and missed what she wanted. She will be bullied for not being successful."

"Your knowledge about her certainly seems to be growing by leaps and bounds." Helios spoke as if he were a superior being. "Confine yourself to facts."

I knew he would not have put on these tyrannical airs had he not been in a vile temper, and I so far sympathised as to lose my own and say no more.

"Give me what evidence you possess in a clear, business-like way," he went on severely. "Did you see who came into my room?"

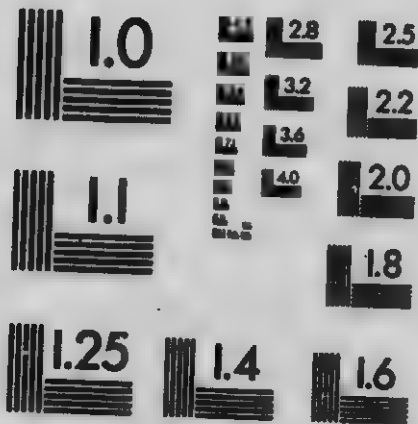
"No."

"I understood you to tell me you did."



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"I understood you to tell me I was to keep to facts."

"Whom did you see?"

"I have not the least idea."

"Did you see a stranger enter your window?"

"Yes."

"You saw her pass through your room. If you did not see her enter mine, where did she go?"

"She shut my door."

"A boy dressed as a girl might deceive you."

"Certainly."

"Do you think this was a boy?"

"No."

"Why did you not call me the moment you saw this person?"

"I don't know."

"What length of time elapsed before you opened your door?"

"Five minutes."

"Why did you wait? Perhaps you thought her a ghost and were afraid?"

Silence.

"Where did you see this person again?"

"Jumping out of this window."

"Where did she go?"

"Where you came."

"She certainly did not go there, or I should have met her."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Perhaps you thought her a ghost!"

Helios looked at me with his magisterial eye.

Then compassion for her overcame my sulkiness.

"I don't think she's more than a child," cried I; "and I'm awfully sorry for her; and she didn't steal."

"Housebreaking is criminal enough. I certainly cannot permit this sort of thing!"

"Don't, my liege!" said I, in derision, for his helplessness with respect to the raids of a girl struck me with comic force.

He stalked out of the room, not paying the slightest further attention to me, and I was again much offended to hear him consulting Mrs. Prince about the subtilty of those things which he ought to have taken upon my evidence. I decided to do the thing which I thought would annoy him most—to go upstairs and to bed as if nothing had happened.

I went to my own room. The window was still open, but I was too cold and angry to do more than listen for a moment to the men still searching the garden and trying to set on the dogs, and to the wind which was rattling by. I closed the window with a snap. If I had only known something that concerned me I should not have closed it, but it was best as it was.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHAT THE BURGLAR BESTOWED

I CANNOT understand why people are so uneconomical of pleasure in the matter of sunrises. Most people regard them as worms for early birds, choice but unattainable ; whereas, there is not the slightest need to leave them to the larks and thrushes. I would not in winter have a bedroom that did not command the south-east, and I always move my bed so that the pillow can see the sunrise. Why should a bed stand with its head against the wall ? I have asked a great many people, and never received an intelligent reason, although they all express an idiotic dislike to the idea of sleeping in a bed that stands "just anywhere."

It is delightful, in the dark days of the year, to turn on one's pillow and enjoy the sunrise, from the first red streak that shoots the brown night through with a glow of colour, till the time when it is almost broad light, and the rays begin to streak over the lowest barrier. The blaze of the sun as he first looks over the edge of the world, although a moment highly lauded in literature and guide-books, is the light of common day ; it is the hour before

that that is adorned with a ravishing display of Aurora's vestments.

On the morning that followed that night of beautiful intrusion, the February sun was still rising over the sea some way south of the first red cliff, and my bed was asquint across a corner. I turned heavily on my pillow, and found myself face to face with a sort of sunrise that we do not often have. The sea and sky to the south-east were filled with mist which was just beginning to take on a uniform flush, not rosy but scarlet, as if a huge bulk of gas were burning slowly without explosion. In the next half-hour the colour brightened and lightened, without any variation of light and shade in the whole expanse, and nothing to be seen against the even, fiery vapour except the dim, dark outline of the red cliff in the foreground and the milky lapping of the waves on the rocky points that were creeping far out into the water after the ebbing tide.

I lay still, feeling dazed. My hasty theory of the small hours, that the beautiful maiden was employed by some evil person to steal watches and other articles of jewellery, did not seem so plausible in the morning as it had done at night; and when I remembered her face and her soft, beseeching accents, the theory of the naughty girl, or the girl with a monomania, did not seem to fit any better. I knew now what must have become of her at the time we lost her. There was only one thing she could have done—she must have climbed the trellis of the verandah again, as she did to get in, and lain

there out of sight till we were all indoors again. I could almost have wept to think of the stupidity by which we had missed her.

That day the lands of North Hay, the house, and all it contained, were sold. The auction passed off quite peaceably, neither man nor ghost interfering. A son of General Oldham, lately returned from abroad, purchased the place where his father had lived so long, and also the Home Farm, at a very reasonable figure. Helios bought the Dairy Farm. Ralph Girdlestone was kept sober till the necessary business was over, and betrayed a degree of disappointment and anger that seemed absurd, as he had nothing to expect but what happened. By the end of the day an old family was dispossessed of all it had ever acquired; but the amount realised was sufficient to pay in full the creditors of the old squire, while the creditors of Ralph Girdlestone, the son, finally received perhaps more money than was rightly owing to them. They were a shady lot — money-lenders, book-makers, horse-dealers and such like. When Girdlestone left the neighbourhood he gave out that he was returning to France, where he still insisted that he had a family.

The Dairy Farm, whose tenant, it will be remembered, was the ill-tempered woman who had married my ship-wrecked Portuguese, gave as many acres to Lone End as were needed for the dignity of that establishment. It was not bought by Helios with the idea of acquiring idle dignity, but to let it in small holdings with model cottages. He was bent

on trying to work out the land problem in a small way for himself, and discovering what could and could not be done with thought and a moderate capital.

That evening we were very full of talk and plans concerning the new purchase, and Helios had occasion to look out some documents relating to Lone End, with maps of that and the adjoining property. He was explaining everything to me as if I were joint-owner, which I quite felt myself to be; and when he went into the office to get the papers I went with him, and perched myself on the table while he unlocked the safe. The pearl, by the way, had been carefully lodged in the bank that day. It was after ten at night; the shutters, as a result of what had occurred, were all up and barred. The servants and the dogs had gone to bed. No words can say how silent night can be at Lone End when the still tide is at ebb, and the wind gone to sleep in some distant lair, and the very music of the stars muffled by the dewy curtains of the world.

There were two keys to the safe, both of which hung on the watch-chain. One, much smaller than the other, was rarely used; it belonged to a double flooring of the safe, and opened a large, shallow compartment on the bottom of the safe in which Helios kept those maps and plans.

Suddenly he uttered a passionate exclamation. He stood up, and, to my great surprise, turned quite pale. He stared sternly down into the safe with his hands behind him.

The Spanish Dowry

There, thrown in with a coarse handkerchief, lay a heap of precious stones. I stooped down and poked at them with my finger at first, as if they had been beetles or some other disagreeable objects to be investigated. There were diamonds and emeralds, but what I admired most were pearls. Many had a setting similar to that of the pearl we had just removed for safety; their number and size and delicate beauty were amazing, even though they were dulled by neglect. I touched them more and more tenderly as I went on poking at them, not knowing what to do. Helios seemed to have become part of the silence.

Then I said: "It's been a queer sort of burglary!"

But when I looked up at him he had such a sad, badgered expression in his eyes that I grew sober.

"Give me the handkerchief," said he.

The jewels had evidently been carried in it; it was knotted at the corners. I untied it, and we shook it out to the light. It was a modern, coarse, common thing, such as might be got anywhere for twopence; but a legend was skilfully worked upon it in red thread. It ran: "The contents are the property of Mr. Ferguson, of Lone End."

For a few minutes we were both speechless. Then Helios began to complain aloud. "Suppose she never comes back — suppose we can't find her, what are we to do? I never knew anything more annoying than this particular sort of persecution."

I sat upon the floor and said: "Yes; we might naturally enjoy the visits of a lovely girl; we might naturally enjoy having a hoard of precious stones laid at our feet; but even these things are to be quarrelled with when thrust upon us willy-nilly."

Helios did not answer. He stood with his arms crossed, and I felt that I had been almost ribald, yet I went on: "If she had not come, if she had not poured out treasure before you, the very imagination of such things would have appeared the most joyful dream."

"I fancy," said he bitterly, "that many of the romantic incidents we can imagine to be agreeable would be just as disagreeable as this if they happened. This is a very serious matter, you know. These things must be worth thousands of pounds; the antique setting alone is worth a great deal." He was stooping now, looking at them more closely.

The jewels themselves had appeared to me exquisitely interesting, but when he mentioned their money value I began to feel almost alarmed, not merely by the general sense of being hemmed in with the sordid and commonplace, but by our uncomfortable position.

"They must in some way belong to the Girdle-stones," cried Helios.

He pushed them, with the handkerchief, back in the drawer, and locked it up. Then he began to slowly pace the hall, his arms clasped in front of him, his head bowed. I think that some shadow from the

event of the coming day was cast on his heart by this strange discovery.

Neither of us doubted that the rich bundle had been deposited by the young girl who had risked so much to get it in into my uncle's keeping. There was a childishness about the care and the carelessness of the whole action, about the slight wrapping and the painstaking sampler stitches—the effort at a reckless deed of gift—that touched his heart while it remained dark to his mind.

I remember now the sound of his quiet footsteps on the bricks. The dogs with their chins on the ground lay motionless, following him with the eyes of love; I sat on the arm of a chair, feeling that I had never cared enough for Helios before, but that now I would give my life to do him service—all of which meant, although I was hardly experienced enough to know it, that Helios, a powerful man, was in a mood of strong emotion which affected us by some more subtle means than conscious expression.

I tried to turn my mind to detective work on the new phase of our perplexity, but I could think of nothing but Helios, and I began to enter a little into the aspect his marriage trouble bore for him. The single pearl he had once sold was in his mind, and all the memories of those brief hours of mutual trust which had brought a return—how transient!—of youth and beauty to an ill-fated woman. These jewels—wherever or by whom discovered—were surely

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hers by right. Now someone said they were his!
And she lay dying.

Helios paced up and down. The dogs watched
him. How still the night was! I always yet
associate the stillness of night with pearls.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SORROWS OF HELIOS

LAWLESS came out the next morning. Before he referred to the cause of his visit Helios told him what had happened. I was there and supplemented the story. Lawless was a good fellow; we both believed in him; but it became evident that he found it very hard to believe in us. When, however, in proof, we showed him the treasure his incredulity passed into depression.

"I'd have worked a lifetime to get hold of this for any of my clients. I'd have prosecuted people, or dogged their footsteps, or disputed their wills, or anything else that could be done in the way of the law, for the sake of an heirloom of this sort, and have counted it a professional success to have the chance; and here we are landed with the heirloom, no trouble to get it, and perhaps nothing so much to be desired as to get rid of it. Who is the girl? Where did she get it?"

But Lawless did not waste time over the hoard just then. He had news of importance to give, and went into the library with Helios.

The remark that for sins there is forgiveness but

not for mistakes, is rather stupid because it says too much. Yet I suppose there may be no greater sorrow than to discover oneself in a serious mistake; for in turning heartily from wrong-doing there is a real and immediate consolation, but when a man who has faithfully endeavoured to do justice and to love mercy finds that he has taken, without suspecting it, a wrong road, which has led him into that evil city where the strong are blind and crush the weak, the balm of personal reformation is not his. He feels lost, and in discouragement is apt to think that it is the very system and trend of things that need to be reformed; the bravest man, unable to blame the universe, is left a prey to harsh remorse.

When I again saw Helios he was different—a difference that I cannot analyse, still less express. Lawless had brought proof that Roy had died a year before Mrs. Roy married my uncle. Although the news that his marriage was valid was not, in view of our recent knowledge, surprising, it came as a great shock to him, and through him, to me—which proves that the set or expectation of one's whole self is sometimes more than one can give a reason for.

It was the conclusion that Helios had at first desired so ardently that he had shut his mind to its probability; now the certainty brought him the sudden accusation of years of unfounded suspicion and cruel neglect. The new agent had not, like his predecessor, tried to track Roy, but had spent his time in searching for Roy's parents. This agent was himself on the way to England with a further pur-

pose which excited Lawless ; but Helios could not attend to anything else after proof was given of the validity of his marriage.

"I might as well have talked to a statue," Lawless complained to me. "I talked, but he did not hear a word."

This was said when Helios had gone upstairs to prepare for starting to London. Evans was packing him up ; Hudson was putting the horse in the trap ; Mrs. Prince was making sandwiches which even she must have known Helios would not eat. The tears were streaming down her face all the time. I began to believe with Helios that she was growing nicer. Helios, who had never given them till now any explanation of what followed his marriage, called his household together and in one brief sentence informed them what the mistake had been and of that day's news. I cannot think that the mere facts warranted our pain, or the change from blame to charity that we felt for the dying lady, for it remained true that she had been to blame. Again it was the emotion of Helios which infected us all, although he gave it such scant expression.

Certainly he did not lose the hour in thought or talk. He forgot that he had wanted to take me to town, and I don't think his mind gave more than superficial heed to anything else, although he did not omit parting instructions. Lawless and I were to make an inventory of the jewels, and Lawless was to take them to the bank. I am sure, however, that as he gave these orders he did not care a jot what became of the jewels. The servants were bidden to

look after me, and I to direct the household wisely. Then he was gone. He never said where he went, or why; but we all understood that, whether his wife was able to see him or not, he would stay beside her now as long as her life lasted.

Until he was gone I had no time to think; and when, with his impatient driving, the wheels were rapidly lost to our hearing, I felt so depressed that I wanted to be by myself and reflect on the sorrow that had come to us, rather than enter with Lawless into a renewed examination of the mystery of the jewels. I, who for weeks had wanted to think of nothing else but girls and pearls, now felt that Lawless was lacking in good taste to urge the subject. For indeed I was very fond of Helios, and his look as he bade me good-bye gave me a more real heartache than I had ever yet experienced. It filled me with grief for the loneliness of the woman who had never insisted on her own innocence, and I was weighed down by her sad destiny, which had also given to the kindest of men the cup of remorse. I found my heart crying out to heaven that in some way the unfortunate wife might still have enough life and health to accept such sacrifice of devotion as he was eager to bestow.

But Lawless recovered his spirits as soon as Helios was well gone. He ventured some observations as to the way Mr. Ferguson had taken his news, but as I could not think of anything to say in answer he went no further in that direction. While we took lunch in moody silence, he gave me several pieces of information as to the law concerning found

property, as to the comparative value of jewels, as to hidden treasures which had, as a matter of fact, existed and been found.

It was odd, but I found myself feeling something of that contemptuous impatience of the whole tiresome question that Helios had so often displayed.

"Well," said I, to cut the matter short, "to find valuables is one thing, and to announce that you have found them in your own strong box is another—and not so pleasant. What do you advise should be done?"

"How can I say? It's a lawyer's business first to say what the law is—to ascertain the law from code and precedent. Where is the law that applies to this? I might spend the rest of my life seeking for a precedent."

So lunch went on. We ate as men eat fish which is full of bones, or game which is riddled by shot—not with any appearance of enjoyment.

After that we set to the business of the inventory—I, because Helios had called it a duty, Lawless with gusto. He began to enjoy himself more and more as he examined each pretty thing and weighed it on the letter-scale. I acted as clerk, at first almost mechanically.

"You have heard nothing more about Girdlestone's family?" queried Lawless. "Does Mr. Ferguson consider it real or mythical?"

"He refuses to consider it." I spoke remembering with appreciation this refusal which Helios had given in the inn parlour after our visit to the priest.

"Carp considers it certainly mythical unless the

woman had money. He may have married someone on that account. She is not likely to be rich long, poor beggar." Then he added: "Our American man has wind of something important—I don't know what. There may be daughters; was this one of them?"

I listened with my lips tight shut.

"A girl that has Girdlestone for a father might well want protection," went on Lawless. "But how did she come here? Where has he been keeping her? And how did she come by the pelf? If this is the Spanish dowry, you may be sure he knew it existed, and has been all this time seeking it in the house. Perhaps he has come back often before to seek it—that would explain the ghostly story. If he took a girl there, she might have found it and outwitted him. In that case, of course, it would belong to Mrs. Ferguson, seeing that she has given up all her claim on the land to pay his debts; but his girl was not likely to know that. If she had known, why should she not have come and said so openly?"

We sat and worked and meditated, and made remarks as the result of our meditations; but I did not make many, for I did not wish to discuss my maiden with Lawless, or tell him anything that might aid him to find her. I wanted to find her myself.

"If she came with Girdlestone, she has, of course, gone with him," I said, wondering whether they were gone.

"The first thing to be done," said he, "is to examine all the Girdlestone papers in our firm's possession,

and find out if these jewels tally with those mentioned in the Spanish marriage settlement, and if they really are not mentioned in any subsequent will."

When Hudson returned from the railway station, Lawless insisted that he should ride back with him and the jewels as escort, which made Hudson very ill-tempered, because he did not know what Lawless carried.

Lawless departed thus, with the treasure buttoned under his coat and a sulky groom riding after, leaving me with a copy of the inventory, duly signed and witnessed. I was glad to see him go, for as to the jewels I felt ashamed, as it was certainly my fault that we possessed them and had lost their bearer; and I wanted only to think about Helios that evening.

CHAPTER XX

THE BANSHEE

I DON'T think I slept much that night, but I did drop off in the small hours, and woke in the first eastern glimmer to find that our missel thrush had returned. I looked out into the gusty February morning, and saw a little heap of something like a pine-cone on his favourite poplar branch. Then, unfolding his head with a whistle that bubbled out in the very act, flitting to the tree-top, he began singing and shouting in the very midst of the scudding storm—a chir-r and a shriek of delight, a quack-quack-quack like a duck gone mad in an access of musical aspiration; then a long extravaganza which seemed to touch upon various subjects, such as earwigs and cherries, sweet birds and crocuses, though what he wished the world to know concerning them I could never quite make out.

I was much cheered by the return of this bird. No other, as far as I know, sings through the gales of early spring, or is so faithful to his chosen perch, or so fearless in his cheerful companionship with the human denizens of the haunt he has selected. I felt that his return was a good omen. I lay and

wondered whether it ever occurred to him that he might have saved himself his great exertion, for none of the other birds troubled themselves to produce notes at that season. He sat there, on the outermost twig, outlined against the bare heaven, and made the world ring with his ceaseless ditty for a full hour before he went down for his first worm at sunrise. When he did go, I can tell you the worms found small shift. A minute after, he was up again and in full song.

The year before, Helios had found a good name for him; we called him John Quill, partly because of his dainty determination to flaunt himself in rude weather. He cocked his head on this side and that, while the blackbirds and finches and common thrushes could only twitter below in the coverts biding their time, as the seedlings of summer must wait in the shelter of daffodil flowers.

Our men, who had not heard the upshot of the "burglary," in their master's absence conceived their special responsibility to be to protect the household from a return of the house-breakers. They made ready for thieves, not for generous damsels who went about bestowing wealth. This distressed me, for I could not bear to think that my maiden might venture within our walls to be roughly treated. In my fear I found that Mrs. Prince could appear very amiable, for she shared it with me to the extent of warning Evans against making so deplorable a mistake as to touch any young lady under the impression that she was a robber.

I found myself overhearing this and his reply.

Evan, was tenderly reproachful. "I can't see as I should be likely to behave ill. Did yer ever see me aught but kind to a female? If you've seen such signs in me, just tell me where and when, ma'am, that I may improve myself." He was becoming almost tearful at her injustice, so I closed my door.

Mrs. Prince could not issue instructions to Hudson, for she and Hudson were always covertly at enmity; and then, too, Hudson had not got over his sulkiness at being sent on that foolish ride with Lawless. It was strange to find that any circumstances could have so whirled our domestic affairs as to have brought me round to the side of Mrs. Prince against Hudson.

A few days went slowly by. Lawless had a detective about, but nothing transpired. Girdlestone had gone to London, and apparently gone alone. Every hour I dreaded receiving news that Mrs. Ferguson had passed too far into the regions of death to receive the amends Helios must long to make. I had a feeling that his heart would break if the culmination of his long effort to be generous only ended in vain self-accusation. I could now only see as I knew he saw; I could not argue a case against the poor lady at all, although the faults for which I had long hated her had received no palliation.

I had now settled down to the conviction that my wealth-bestowing maid was Girdlestone's daughter. Her need of protection from him was obvious, and I longed to think out a scheme of rescue, and still

The Spanish Dowry

more, to act it out alone, but did not know how or where to begin.

One day, in the latter part of the afternoon, I set out to explore the new property Helios had acquired. The Dairy Farm was an undulating strip of fertile pasture varied with bits of woodland and a few arable fields, with here and there a fine old tree standing in the open. The farmhouse was built in a dimple of the land hidden both from the road and river by the declivity and a sheltering grove. It was an old place, thatched and roughcast, poor enough now, but it had once served as a dower house to North Hay. Dislike, and even fear, of the woman who occupied it had ever closed its beauties to the neighbourhood. A new era had come, and I no longer dreaded to meet her, for she had already begged hard to be allowed to remain a year, and as Helios was undecided she would need to be amiable to anyone from our house.

Hudson had been told by his master to measure the land in one of the fields which bordered the high road to find how many cottage lots could be made out of it. I did not know exactly how to find him, but I set out with that intention, succeeded in missing him, and did not even get to a point that commanded a view of the old house. I went across fields and along hedges, finding myself at last at an old paling which divided the farm pastures from the North Hay park. All romantic interests seemed to have left the big house of North Hay since it had passed into the hands of so prosaic a person as one of the Oldhams; but the sweetness of spring was in the groves, and I

stood looking at the red blush of budding undergrowth and overgrowth.

My eye was soon caught by something that moved among the ruddy twigs at a little distance. The daylight was fading; still I was certain this was a woman. I tried to recognise in her my maid of the pearls, but did not succeed. What seemed very curious was that she was dressed in white—even her head wrapped in white. She was slight and feeble-looking, and seemed to flit constantly with uneasy, fitful motions, as if she were in some absorbing reverie.

Just then I heard Hudson's step. I must have come past the lots he was measuring, but he was not following me; he was inside the park and coming out by an old road as fast as he could walk without running, and he no sooner saw me than he turned toward me, though he held up his hand as if to entreat silence.

"As I'm alive, sir, I've seen her! She must be dead, poor lady, and come back to see her old place once more. I remember well, before the master was married, how she used to walk in this very wood, up and down, up and down, and never a bit of colour came into her cheeks till the master had promised to marry her."

"What are you talking about, Hudson?" said I. I felt the family dignity somewhat ruffled.

But Hudson was much too excited and, I might say, frightened, although he was a placid, burly fellow, to stand upon the order of his remarks.

The Spanish Dowry

"Well, sir; if ever a woman in this world thought a lot of a man, it was her, poor thing."

To my amazement he pointed with his thumb to where the slight figure I had seen was disappearing down a woodland vista.

Hudson now noticed that she could still be seen from where we were. He uttered a sound of dismay and stared at her, and I could see that his face was pale. "God alive!" he said, under his breath, "I never thought to see her again like that; and the master he told me what he'd gone up to town for, for he knew I'd a great respect for her. It's all over, you see, sir, and she's walking just where she used to walk with him. There's something about the place, they do say, that makes it easy for them as 'as gone to come back, but I never believed it till this blessed hour."

"I don't believe it now, Hudson; that's just a girl."

"No, sir; that's Mrs. Ferguson. Is it likely I'd be mistaken who saw her every day nearly for the two years she was here, and very constant after the marriage had been arranged?—and she often spoke to me with the gracious smile she had."

I looked more intently, and remembered, as I looked, having read some learned paper upon apparitions of the dying at the time of their death. The paper had proved conclusively that the evidence for this sort of ghost was of much better quality than the evidence for any other, yet, some way or other, even in the fading light, I did not really believe for a moment that the young woman was other than a live human being.

But Hudson had acquaintance with my uncle's wife which I had not. "It's Mrs. Ferguson, sir," he said—"her that was Miss Girdlestone, for she's as like her as a woman is to her face in the glass. Who else could it be? for she had no sister, sir, no, nor any one of her blood that was a woman."

I was very melancholy. The pre-ter-natural effects of the hour and place were upon me; I could not but feel keenly that had I had a man's ordinary powers, I could easily have leaped the fence and run and come up with the lady. Oh, how I would have liked to bar her pathway and make her give an explanation of herself!

But Hudson, convinced, and consequently in no mind to tarry, said that he had left his measuring tools in the lower field and must go while there was light to find them. I wanted to keep him and persuade him to go back to her. I said peevishly: "It's no sort of way to show me a ghost, and then leave me here alone."

"No more it is, sir," said he. "It's no fit place; and, what's more, the night in the woods has a dampness about it that we don't get in the open by the sea."

So he gave me his arm to lean on, and we got out from the trees and were going over the open pasture, I still wanting to return. I asked him where he had left his tools, thinking I had caught him in unseemly idleness. I was a little startled when the good fellow replied:

"I went because I heard her crying, sir. Oh, but she was crying the way a child cries, loud out;

but there was more in it, sir, than in a child's crying."

"Dear me!" I said; "this is serious. We can't leave her alone in distress like that, you know, whoever she is."

"Well, sir," said he, "that's what I thought, so I left my traps and went; and when she heard me she 'came quite quiet-like, but went from me when I came up with her; and I looked at her—I just looked once—and then I came away, for I saw who it was; and as to her trouble, sir, whatever it is, she's past the help of either you or me—leastwise, unless it were lawful to say a prayer for her soul, sir."

I had been moving on with him. Now I stopped and looked about me in the lovely evening solitude. We had reached a rise where we could see a band of red round the edge of the western sea; and above, among the clouds, there were rifts of pink sunlight blending with the silver shining of the moon. Nothing was crisp or clear, for the wings of night were settling down about us. The landscape, in colour purple and brown, assumed an outline rounded and soft. The trees stood out like plumes on an old-fashioned hearse, and the line of the breaking waves beyond Lone End showed a ridge of wonderful whiteness and brightness—white as the linen that shrouds are made of, bright where the foam leaped up, as the spirits of the departed are said to be.

Just then, in a wood nearer to us than the park—in fact, near where Hudson had first heard it, we heard a woman's cry; and the cry broke into a sob. The air was rent with sobs and sighs so quick and

passionate, so helpless, that our hearts stood still with pity. Yet the lamentation was not loud; it was only distinctly audible.

"Stop!" whispered I; "we must go there." And I pointed whence the cries came.

"No, sir," whispered Hudson. "I know now what it is. It's what they do call in Ireland a banshee. No, sir; for if you follow it, you may go on till you die, but you'll never find it; and if the master was here—" He actually began walking in the opposite direction, drawing me with him.

I was very angry. "The other way!" I said. "You are a coward." Then, as he made to go on, I shook myself free from his grasp.

We had been speaking to one another only in whispers, and our steps made little sound upon the deep sod. The sobbing and moaning went on in the covert some way further from the high road than we

"If the master were here—" Hudson began again. While I was holding his arm, his legs betrayed an obvious inclination to run toward the high road.

"But when the master isn't here, I am the master," I said. I would not listen to his reasoning. "Go, if you will," said I. "If you had the heart of a man, you'd rather die than leave her in such a plight."

"It isn't 'her,' sir," he whispered; "the banshee is an 'it.' Her went up the grove, and is far off; like enough she can't even make a sound. This thing is the banshee."

"I am a gentleman; I cannot leave a woman in distress," said I briefly.

So I took my crutch and went resolutely toward the spinney, expecting to hear Hudson's feet after me; but he did not come. I truly think that he stayed partly because he thought I should turn frightened and come back to him, which would be better for me. He had not overcome his sulks of a few days before, and that was, in part, the cause of his ill manners. I went as fast as I could. I came to a declivity and went down, and found myself in a beautiful wood at the top of what seemed an old sunk wall. It had been made, as I learned afterwards, years and years before, when the house had been occupied by the Girdlestone dowagers for a generation or two. Had it been light I should not have dared, as I did, to vault over it by the help of my crutch, for I should have seen that the crutch, which I supposed to be on firm ground, was really only fixed on a ledge. As I jumped it slipped, and I fell—not far, about six feet, perhaps. I landed on a bank overgrown with fern and bracken, and such slight brushwood as did not prevent me rolling some way further.

I found myself at the foot of the bank, having lost my crutch, bruised and scratched, but not injured. I was aware that at the thud and rustle of my descent the sound of lamentation had suddenly stopped. By the way the bracken grew untrodden in the coppice I argued that the fragment of wall was probably not known to Hudson, and that, however he might try, he would not easily find me. Being helpless, I lay still, wondering at the futility of my knight-errantry.

To my astonishment, a woman pushed apart the bushes and looked at me. It was no banshee, nor was it a lady who could possibly be the last daughter of the house of Girdlestone, nor was it my maiden. When she accosted me, or rather, when she accosted the form she saw, I knew her for the shrewish farmer. From the venomous tirade of words she poured out at me I soon perceived that she thought I was the person who had been audibly lamenting and with whom she had previously quarrelled. As she went on I gathered of what sort the quarrel had been.

"Get up, and be off!" were her first words. "Didn't I say it before? Am I going to have my house disgraced? Oh, yes, you can cry! I've heard you at it this half-hour. What's the good of that here? Go cry through the village street; no doubt you'll find someone to take you in. I've found you out—galloping about in the night when you pretend to be in bed. Do you think I'll have any old women with a foreign tongue swindling me? I've been blind long enough."

These were her words, but the way she said them I could not, if I would, write down, for in anger she had fallen on the roughest dialect of the countryside. The vituperation which followed I would not, if I could, give even the words of. Much of it I did not understand, and none of it do I wish to remember. She threw such a quantity of mud at me that my spirit gasped as the body does when shut out from air.

I did not make any sign, so she went on. I gathered that she supposed me to be one of those

young women to whom she had engaged to reach the secrets of her dairy, that she found she had been deceived in my character, and that I had a concealed object of an evil sort, that I had disgraced her house, and that, although certain "Romans" (this classic term puzzled me at first) had paid a large fee in advance, she would not keep me longer for twice or thrice the amount of gold—no, she would not keep me another night in her house. Her husband might swallow that when he came back. He should talk none of his foreign gibberish to me any more, nor I to him. Did I think she would ever have kept me at all, or changed honest novice women for me, if she hadn't supposed the tale he told was true? "Ladies" indeed! "Rich ladies," "High born ladies." Oh, yes! but she knew better now. Here she became profane in her wrath; but this was less important, as she also became inarticulate, gnashing her teeth and almost foaming.

By this time I realised that, great as had been her anger at first, it was the simple fact that I was sitting quite unmoved, looking at her steadily, that goaded her to fury. I realised, too, that for some reason she was afraid to offer me personal violence, and so her rage made her nearly as helpless as I was from having lost my crutch.

I rejoiced to think I was enduring this instead of the girl who had been weeping, for whom all this venom was intended. I hoped that, whoever she was—poor little convent novice, or foreign lady in disguise—she had had the wit to creep in the darkness where she would not hear.

The woman stumped about. I could see that she was gesticulating, not with her arms but with her hands—sure sign of ill in a woman! I did not like facing her any more than I would have liked to face a demon; but I did not intend to let her off one hair's breadth of her punishment, so I sat till she became silent from exhaustion of the voice.

"Will you be so good as to tell me who you are, and what you are talking about?" I have always been a sad Radical at heart, but just then I made it very plain that I spoke the speech of the ruling class. "Have you been drinking, my good woman? I shall have to have you up before Mr. Ferguson for the language you have been using. In the meantime, you had better step up this bank and tell the groom that I have had the misfortune to fall. I am sorry to be obliged to ask you to do this for me, as I am sure, from the way you have been behaving, Mr. Ferguson would not wish his servants to have anything whatever to do with you."

But she turned and fled, perhaps terrified not more by the exposure I threatened than by the convulsive condition into which she had worked herself. I could see through the trees that she made her way back to the house, which stood some way below.

CHAPTER XXI

AGAIN THE MOON AND THE MAIDEN

I was full of what the woman had revealed.

The first dairy pupils sent to her by the French nuns were, no doubt, those whom Lady High Feather had inspected, and whose indenture papers Helios had examined. My Portuguese had deceived me perfectly. The uncouth novice women had been changed before their time was up for my maidens. I thought over the phrases which he had evidently used to persuade his wife to the exchange. "Ladies." "Rich ladies." "Well-born ladies." They had come to the convent when Girdlestone came to the neighbourhood, perhaps; in any case, the nuns must have connived at the exchange. Were they Girdlestone's own daughters? It seemed that one of them had the Girdlestone features, and one of them had Girdlestone jewels. There were many questions that must be asked and answered before I could form an idea of the situation; but what was clear was so elating that I lay and rejoiced. My beautiful maidens had been, and were, close at hand, hiding only under a dress which, if not the white habit of the novice, was certainly made on purpose

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to resemble it. The Portugese who had been their protector was absent ; they were near, and in trouble. I—I—could now protect and console them, and offer them an asylum. Hudson was bound to look me up soon, and while I waited I was in an enchanted land.

The shafts of the white birch seedlings, slender and of untainted purity, stood about me, sustaining a light canopy of exquisite fretwork, the only delicate roof between me and heaven. The evening clouds were parting in great rifts through which the moonlight was added to the evening twilight. Close by me, on one side, stood a white-leaved holly, its every twig glistening in the moonbeams which, in the mellow gloaming, only seemed to assert themselves when they fell upon some reflecting facet. The white holly was the one dense tree in this little wood, which had evidently grown up according to its own wild fancy since, as a plantation, it was started in the epoch of the Girdlestone wealth. About the holly a straggling laurustinus held up branch above branch of slight, irregular stems and clustered blossom, and near its root a spiky japonica—black in the night—was blooming where none might see. Sere bracken rose all round me, and when I lay back with my head down it was like a forest above which the upper growth towered visibly into heaven. The bracken and other ferns clothed the whole slope, and rose in heaps of dense shadow against the sunk wall which stood in darkness.

Listening for Hudson and hearing nothing, I drifted away into a little romantic dream. It is a

very good thing to live always close to the door of a fairy tale, for sometimes, as I can aver, the most endearing realities meet one there. I soon heard the approaching tread of some animal; it came picking its way through the brushwood, and I sat up to reason with it lest it should take me in its path. Then the familiar form of one of the farm-horses came cautiously into view round the silver holly; there, among the slender birches, knee-deep in ferns, it paused. I saw that a girl was lying upon its back, her arms on its mane. She had obviously taken this position the better to hide as she moved about. All the light there was fell full upon her. I recognised her clearly enough by the grace of outline and the small, shapely head.

She perceived me, and gave at once a sigh of relief and recognition.

"Are you hurt? Do you think she has gone?" she whispered.

"She has gone to the house," I said. And then I assumed an air of genial authority. "You must not stay here another night, you know. You must come to our house. Our housekeeper will do everything for you."

But she reverted to the virago, of whom her head was full. "How could you talk up to her so splendidly? She terrifies me. She terrified us once before when she was angry with her husband. We saw her beat him. And now he is out with the boats, and she has turned against us. I can't make out her words, but you spoke to her magnificently."

My head was turned by this adulation.

"Oh," said I, "that wasn't magnificent. I can always put an end to any nonsense from people of her sort. You have just to fix them with your eye and show them that you are made of different stuff." I wondered, with wild impatience, how I could get hold of my crutch.

"I don't understand that," she replied. "Where we live you have to be pretty weighty, or else have lots of tin, to bully people."

I was startled and quite at a loss; this strange language was used so seriously by her musical voice. "Where is your country?" I asked.

She did not answer. A little whimper broke from her, like a cry of heart soreness which it was beyond her power to conceal. Her words came with dolorous little hesitations among them.

"We thought Mr. Ferguson might be kind; but he is so very mean and obdurate, though granny wrote him a beautiful letter. Anna cannot bear it here as well as I can; it makes her ill. She goes at night to a hiding-place in the big house; then when things are better, I go and bring her back. Mostly I can stand it all right; but to-day that woman is just awful, and granny is so long coming. She said she would be back at once. Did he show you granny's letter? Do you know where she is? Our hearts are just broken waiting for her." Then she broke off suddenly, going back to where she began. "Did you hurt yourself when you fell?"

I could not follow her meaning: I did not want to frighten her by asking questions.

"Who is your grandmother? You must come home.

We will take care of you. Who is Anna? she must come too."

"Oh, no, no," she whispered vehemently. "Anna wouldn't; nothing would make her until he answers granny's letter. And I wouldn't; I wouldn't have gone into his mean, horrid old house just for the minutes I did but that we were in such dreadful alarm." Then she added, with hasty, eager curiosity: "Did he find them? Did they make him more good-natured? If he had any horse sense he'd have known long ago what Mr. Girdlestone was looking for. They say he puts people in prison; has he put granny in prison?"

I was trying with all my eager wits to catch at any coherent thread in what she was saying, but I was, in fact, lost in those regions where the practical mind is not dominant. I was no more capable of hard reasoning than a man is when he is absorbed in the cantoes of Dante or the *Faerie Queen*. The way in which she managed the rough horse into turning or moving or standing as she chose, slapping and pulling its head with the affectionate ease of assumed intimacy, the attitudes of lithe, sinewy grace she carelessly assumed on its sturdy back, the beauty of the sylvan dell and the glamour of the moonlight—all these seemed to belong to the realms of fancy; and let it be added, I was full of bashful, self-consciousness in her presence.

I ventured to say, "Girdlestone is your father?"

"No, indeed he isn't! We found him out; and when granny left us at the convent we found that he was trying to get the loot. We couldn't stand that.

It was too low down to sit still and let him get it."

To my dismay I heard a stir in the vicinity of the house, and knew there was no time for further parley.

"You must not stay in the power of such a woman any longer," I said eagerly. "You must go at once to our house."

Her head was covered with a little close, white cap tied under her chin. Only the perfect clear-cut oval of the face was revealed. About her she had a dark, nondescript cloak, which I supposed to cover the coarse white frock of the novice. A chill fear rose that I could not forbear to express.

"Surely," I wailed, "you are not really going to be a nun!"

First she said "Sh—sh" very softly, and she looked about her with such cautious alertness that the horse in sympathy pricked up his ears. Then she added, in a voice of equal lamentation, but lowered tone: "If you don't bring back granny we shall have to make ourselves nuns."

"Hist!" said I.

Someone was certainly bringing a light. It was the farm-woman returning from her house.

Then I said in a low tone of great authority: "Ride out of her reach at once. Get your sister and go to our house, and tell our housekeeper that I say she must give you all you need, and tell her to send the trap for me." I began to stir about, making as much noise in the rustling bushes as I could, so that the shrew might not hear our whispers.

The light began to glance about in the bushes.

The horse moved off slowly as if browsing, but steadily going round and up the slope.

I composed myself to look as if I had been lolling at my ease. When the woman came up she began peering at me with the light.

"Have you fetched the groom?" asked I.

"Did you have a fall?" asked she.

"Of course I had. How could I possibly be here if I hadn't fallen over the wall?"

"Yes, sir; that's all very well, but you came here to see the girls; and whatever you may say, it's not what Mr. Ferguson would have me putting up with. Everybody knows that Mr. Ferguson doesn't side with that sort of thing."

This was such a complete turning of the tables that I caught my breath. Then I retaliated severely:

"Do you mean to say that when you were here before you thought you were talking to a girl?—that it was a girl you were treating like that, and proposing to turn out of your house at this time of night? What could you be thinking about!"

"Of course, sir, if you say that you didn't come to meet her, I'm bound to take your word for it."

"It doesn't matter to me whether you take my word or not. I shall be obliged if you will find my crutch. It fell from my hand when I fell over the bank."

She began to search with feverish haste, and found it. It was, as I feared, broken, and the breakage evidently impressed her as a corroboration of the account I had given of my arrival on the scene. She began making formal apologies, and explaining that a woman who had to fend for herself, with a

good-for-nothing husband, must take care of her own house.

My first object was to keep her from going up to the open, and spying on the path of my lovely refugee; my next, to get myself in better form. I agreed to go to her house in order to give the girls more time; in fact, it occurred to me to announce that I must have tea, to all of which she agreed, standing in fear of Helios.

So I went to the house, leaning on her arm, which felt as strong as iron. I continued to subjugate her by words of brief authority, pitying in my heart the mild Portuguese who at times was beaten. I sat by the hearth of this unfortunate, and ate the best his house could afford. Even if Hudson did not come at once, I was unwilling to send the woman to Lone End on my errand; I would not have anyone hear what she might say about girls who were for the nonce my own wards by virtue of discovery and prompt action.

My first visit to that old house was strange throughout. We were in the inner kitchen or living room. The walls and roof of black oak were lit only by the light of one candle and the fire. I was trying to find out, by the artful display of indifference, all that the woman knew about my wards, which, to put it briefly, was this:—

Her husband, being able to speak French, and being a good Roman Catholic, had been recommended by the priest to the French sisters, and had been employed by them in many rough bits of work, and more especially they hired him to

row their boat when the wind in winter was too strong for them. Then, as she knew how to please the local taste in dairy produce, and they knew nothing but their silly foreign ways, they had desired her to take two of their young women into her dairy for two months. She explained to me that she had refused, standing firm to her religious principle, but they had offered more money, so, of course, she obliged them. What could a woman do who had to make a profit out of a farm? And the novice women were, so to say, her own sor' for hard work and no gadding. So that was how it came about. But in a little while she quarrelled with the first pair, and a change was arranged. The first two learners went back, and two others were to come. This time they offered more, and paid gold down. Folk said the sisters were poor—well, she minded her own business; it was nothing to her what they had or did; she had made her bargain and held to it, but she always knew no good would ever come of it. These others were a queer sort indeed!

"Did you say that you had two of these novice women staying with you now?" said I carelessly, as if I had only half listened. I was lying on the oak settle with my eyes shut.

With a toss of her head she cried: "Novice women, no!" but she had to feed and put up with two creatures, and only one of them worth her salt. If that good-for-nothing fellow, her husband, hadn't told her that they were gentlefolk, and that in his country gentlefolk worked at times in nunneries in

order to save their souls, she wouldn't have put up with them and their ignorance a day. She put it to me, as one who would know, if a lady in any country would ride bareback, astride like a man, and without bit or bridle. She flapped her hands backward, as if to denote how she cast away such a notion.

"Since you ask me," said I, "there are several countries where princesses and ladies of rank learn to do those things and practise them constantly. Do you sell your home-cured bacon? That seems an excellent fitch."

"The bacon—oh, yes," cried she; "but I cannot believe, sir, about the ladies you speak of."

"High families, in many countries, have their daughters taught to jump through hoops from the backs of horses, and also to swing themselves from tree to tree in the palace gardens for amusement and exercise. I wonder if you would let us have some of the bacon."

The small candle flickered on the centre of the table, and she stood opposite, her face illumined by growing excitement.

"I never did hear!" she ejaculated. "I'm sure, sir, I'd be very soory if I'd offended anyone of real—"

"Real what?" I asked sharply. I have heard much of the snobbery of the rich, but for the perfection of the vice commend me to the poor and greedy.

She remained speechless, folding a cloth she had in her hand with certain jerks of the wrist that betokened the struggle between fear and temper.

The Spanish Dowry

"You mean you would be very sorry to have offended anyone who was powerful, that you'd be very sorry to have missed something you might have secured."

"Ay," said she boldly, "and who wouldn't? But I never could have thought—riding a horse without a saddle at night, as they do tell me she was seen."

Her tone was growing higher and higher; she was trying to whip herself up again into the passion which had failed under the influence of self-interest.

My fall had made me ache all over, and I was growing sick with impatience, but I remember answering: "Young ladies who have these accomplishments must belong to people of distinction; but such people will never come to you again; and besides, you'll hardly be here long. How could Mr. Ferguson keep a tenant who behaved to the gentry as you have done?"

CHAPTER XXII

MY VANITY DETECTED

WHEN an hour had passed and no one came for me, my joy in having found and rescued my wards was modified by the discomfort of my long waiting.

My hostess was glad enough when I at length allowed her to go down to Lone End. She put on her hat—a man's hat—and kicked her feet into heavy shoes which she kept at the door, and, taking a lantern, made off as fast as she could.

It was not till she had been gone some minutes that, with a sort of inward start, I realised that I was in this dim old house alone, where the histories and mysteries of how many lives were written in undecyphered characters on its gloomy surfaces. The outer walls were, I should think, about half a yard thick. The room I was in, and another into which I could see, were lined with old panelling, much of it worm-eaten, some of it patched with deal. I knew by the form of the roof that the upper rooms must have slanting ceilings under the thatch, or else long dark cupboard spaces between the wall of the room and the sloping roof. In all these places for hiding, how many a disagreeable thing might lurk!

The Spanish Dowry

I began to think how strange it was that, having lived most of my life within a mile of this house, I had never crossed the threshold before. I knew of no outsider who was in the habit of coming here; the woman's tongue and temper had seemed to all men a sufficient reason for giving it the go-by; but now the idea that there might be some other cause of repulsion found easy entrance to my mind. While trying thus to combat that ghostly feeling which keeps one on the alert for every sound and sight, a noise in the front of the house startled me. It might have been the lifting of a latch. Then I heard a footfall; someone had entered with careful steps.

Whoever was there, was waiting, listening, or making ready for some further venture. I was sure it was not a girl's light tread. I gathered together my sanest mind, and tried to conclude that it had been the stir of some large house dog. If not that, might it be the advent of one of the French nuns, who seemed to have been in some way responsible for the safety of the girls?

Just then, in the dark inner room through the door of which I was looking, I saw a flicker of light which was evidently shining through a further door. This became so unendurable that I called out: "Who is there? Come into the kitchen and let me see you!"

The light, which had been that of a match, went out. While I looked again, trying to pierce the inner darkness, I saw a face peering at me. It was old and thin, the expression very keen, the eyes

bright. It was someone I had never seen before, and I suppose there must have been enough of enterprise and adventurous mood in the expression to give me the notion that the new-comer was as much a stranger to his present surroundings as I was.

I called out: "Come along! Don't stand there hiding."

A long, lean man now appeared, slowly emerging from the shadow into the threshold of the kitchen door. The cut of his clothes was not familiar, nor the shape of the hat he held. When I could get a good look at him I saw that, besides his individuality, he had a certain impersonal appearance and quality with which all the world is familiar. If he was a ghost he was certainly a Yankee ghost; if a man, he might have been a saint or an assassin, so enigmatic was his expression, but he surely came from the United States.

In any walk of life he would have made his mark. Every line of his thin, angular arms and legs, every curve of the dome that covered his brain, but more especially the wedge-like sharpness of his features and the brightness of his eyes, betokened capacity of every sort.

As for me, I had again the old feeling of having embarked in a real fairy tale.

"May I ask," said the new-comer, in a slow, kindly tone, "who it is that I have the pleasure of addressing?"

Quite to my own surprise I told him who I was, and of my fall, and how I came helpless there. Perhaps I did this knowing instinctively that he

would give no explanation of himself until he knew to whom he was talking, but I think, too, that he had a curious power of attracting confidence.

I was rewarded. After listening, looking keenly at me all the while, he explained his own business without verbal comment on my remarks.

"I am a detective," he said, just as he might have acknowledged to being a carpenter. "Two young ladies are living here, I believe?"

He was not the stupid fellow Lawless had lately had about; if I supposed anything it was that he was employed by Girdlestone.

"The ladies are gone," said I.

"Indeed!" said he. "And, at present, where are they?"

"I cannot tell you. I know—that is enough."

He took a notebook out of his pocket, looked at me, and began to write, saying in an undertone as he did so: "Young gentleman, about twenty, son of neighbouring landowner, waiting for carriage to come, amusing himself by talking like a book. Room with high oak wainscot." Holding his pencil on the page, he asked, with a slight lift of his eyebrows: "The name of the eldest young lady is—?"

"Are you asking me?"

"I was asking you the name of the eldest young lady."

"She is in my charge, and I will tell you nothing more," I said.

"Merely to be sure that we are speaking of the same young ladies," said he, "the eldest is like—"

"The eldest one seems to be like the Girdlestons;

she seems twice to have been mistaken for the last lady of that name who lived here. The younger one is something like a Spanish lady who came from America to a convent across the river. She complains that her grandmother is lost; the Spaniard may be her grandmother."

"Lost!" said he. "Do you mean that you do not know where to find her?"

He was so keen on this that I remembered more clearly how my maiden had cried for her grandmother. Whoever she might be, she ought to be found; so I boldly suggested that if the detective would produce the grandmother, I would undertake to produce the girls. I added: "If you will give me your card, and tell me at which hotel you are staying, my uncle will have pleasure in calling upon you."

His old face for the first time broke into an odd smile. "You're sure you've got the young ladies safe?" he said. Without waiting for my answer, he went on: "I'll guarantee the granny if you have got the young ones safe. When will the uncle come home?"

I had forgotten for the moment the absence of Helios, and remembered it with some dismay; but I said cheerfully that I would keep the young ladies safe and would apprise him of my uncle's return, if he would undertake to bring the grandmother.

His face, long and wedgelike as it was, grew almost broad with humour. I thought he was smiling at my sententious manner, but I have since believed it was at the idea of my exercising any control over the maidens I professed to guard. He

appeared, however, to take their consent for granted, for he gravely accepted my offer, presented me with his card, and made what was perhaps a feint of saying "Good evening."

I was in the full swing of an adventure now, and self-confident again; but as his footsteps retreated I heard him give a sort of whoop as a signal. It was not a sound familiar to English ears, but quite expressive, like a cattle-cry. I did not like this development. I heard voices and returning footsteps. In a minute, to my great astonishment, the door was opened by Lawless.

"Look here!" he said: "Do you mean to say that you have known all about them while I've been hunting the ends of the earth for them?" Lawless was trying to be civil, but he was evidently much annoyed. "You might, perhaps, have saved your uncle the expense of bringing the agent over from America; and now, when with no end of trouble and expense we've tracked the ladies here, it seems you know all about them. How long have they been here, and you in their confidence?"

I grew angry because Lawless was angry, a fact that has a moral, for I had certainly nothing against him; but my mind was distracted from my own grievance by noting that he had spoken of Helios having a personal interest in these girls. I began to wonder how this could be, and then I observed that the tall American had entered behind his companion, and was looking with a serene face over the head of the fuming solicitor. He was our American agent, it seemed.

"How long have you been in their confidence and kept the secret from your uncle?" demanded Lawless.

Whereat I gathered myself up on the settle in a posture of dignity.

"Lawless, if you will tell me whom you are talking of, and what the secret is, and why my uncle, of all men, should be ransacking the ends of the earth for his next neighbour's dairymaids, I shall perhaps be able to understand you."

Lawless jerked himself round to look inquiringly at the American, who took his thin notebook out of a long pocket, and, opening it, began to read: "Resided here until this afternoon. Are at present in custody of young gentleman. Affirms young ladies to be quite safe. Promises to produce them when we produce grandmother."

He snapped the elastic ring about the book, slipped it again into the long pocket, clasped his hands behind him, and stood looking from Lawless to me with a serenity of expression I have never seen equalled, except perhaps on the face of a domestic cat.

"Who are they?" repeated Lawless, shouting at me. "They are Mrs. Ferguson's daughters. That brute lied when he said they died as children. Only the second one died. He knew where they were all the time. He brought them and their grandmother—Roy's mother—from America to help him get the jewels."

I was filled with amazement and also with joy.

"He has lied right and left," said Lawless. "This

is the family he said was in France. How came they here? Why did you not tell me they were here?"

"Well," said I loftily, "their grandmother must be found. I will keep to the compact I have made with this other gentleman."

I was determined to share none of my information with Lawless, not even so far as to let him know how recent it was.

"In the name of—" began Lawless; but he was too angry to go on arguing with me.

I wish he had, and I had worse reason to wish it before long. He might have seen that, in my vanity and excitement, I was quite unfit for the responsibility I had taken, and from which I would not without persuasion retreat. But Lawless had given much time to unravelling the incidents relating to my uncle's marriage; and when about to report to Helios the detective's most recent information, it was, I have no doubt, exceedingly annoying to find me not only uninterested in most of his news, but apparently in possession of the maidens.

He kicked a coal that had fallen from the grate, and then asked me, with severe courtesy, if I was able to come out to the fly that he had in waiting.

I was tired out, and the American lifted me in his arms which were long enough and sinewy enough to carry a bigger man. Lawless, still angry, bred in me an increasing anger, so that by the time we reached the house door at Lone End, he and I, like a pair of foolish children, were not on speaking terms.

The American could do nothing but help me to a

seat in the hall, glance at our interior, and remark, with a formality that appeared to me droll, that he would do himself the pleasure the next day of calling upon the young ladies to congratulate them upon having found a young relative so kind and so influential. He said it in a slow, dreamy way, while he bolstered me up, not losing a moment's time.

As soon as the door was shut, my head swam with a sudden eagerness to know whether the girls were in the house, and a dreadful fear that they were not.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE GHOSTS OF NORTH HAY

MRS. PRINCE was standing in front of me. I knew by one glance at her that she had not been receiving unlooked-for visitors. She was wholly concerned for me, and had brought an odious bottle of smelling salts and was measuring sal volatile in a wine-glass. Struggling against physical faintness and mental terror, I discovered, not only that no one had seen the girls, but that both our men were away from the house.

When she had brought me another crutch, and smoothed my cushions, and literally poured her strongest soup down my throat, I began to realise that there was a gentleness and solicitude in what Mrs. Prince did that deserved from me more than common thanks. I am glad to record that I noticed this before her underlying goodness was tested in a way that made it impossible for me, at least, ever to doubt it again.

Hudson, it seemed, had returned and gone out again, making no report. The farm-woman, having given her taciturn message, had retraced her steps, and Evans had taken our trap up the farm lane to

fetch me, while I had been driven round by the road. Here was I with the knowledge that two tender, defenceless girls, almost maddened by fear and all the misery the shrew's upbraiding could produce, were out alone, probably in the cold and desolate precincts of the empty old Hall, in danger of insult or injury from any loafers who might wander thither. Nothing but my consequential folly had prevented the two respectable men who would have been willing to rescue them from accomplishing that amiable object. I could but wait till Evans returned, knowing there was nothing to be done but drive then, as quickly as might be, and search the mansion and park, and, if need were, all the neighbourhood.

Evans did return, and actually refused to turn his horse's head and drive me back into the woods of North Hay. I knew by this that he had conferred with Hudson.

"I dursn't do it, sir. What would the master say? You're looking more like an illness than driving out in the night. If you'll let me go for the doctor, I'll do that, though I shouldn't be back till midnight."

I said: "It is not a case in which you or I have any choice, Evans. There are two young ladies in great trouble in the park."

"There's no woman kind that belong to you or me, sir, that are without the proper attentions that is the due of women"—here he gave a sidelong glance of tenderness towards Mrs. Prince—"nor could there be; and the master would not have you go goose-chasing, ill as you are, and in the night."

There was nothing, in a usual way, that enraged

me so wildly as that the servants should dispute my authority; I cared nothing for that now, but was dismayed because I could see that Evans, knowing this peculiarity of mine, would not have attempted dispute had he not first entirely determined to disobey. I had believed for some time that Mrs. Prince, in return for the long devotion of Evans, was beginning to have a soft corner in her heart for him, and I supposed she was upholding him now. So I sat in helpless wrath and silence, and Evans went out of my presence.

But in a few minutes, eager to justify himself, he returned to explain that Hudson, having met Mr. Lawless, had heard of my safety, and had gone to bed.

"And he did say, sir—what explains to me the idea you've got in your mind about young ladies—that he saw the poor mistress that's dying."

Evans was stopped in this disclosure, his mouth half open, ready to pour out more mysteries, for I turned upon him, calling him an ignorant fool so fiercely that he retired again.

But I could not for one instant give up the resolve to return to North Hay, and thence, if need be, scour the neighbourhood in my search, so I turned to the only attendant and companion left to me, and calling Mrs. Prince, told her a story which can have given her very little connected information, so confused with my own remorse and self-upbraiding were the few facts I gave.

"It was a nice girl, a very nice girl, I talked to in the bushes after I fell," wailed I, "the girl who was

here that night. They were pupils at the convent, and were sent to learn dairy-work. She has been wanting to claim our protection, but they thought they couldn't." And then I told Mrs. Prince of the farm woman's rage, and that there was another, a more delicate sister, who had run frightened into the park.

I had hardly got out my brief complaint when Mrs. Prince rose up in her might, and I learned, once for all, to value her as she deserved.

I did not hear the first thing she said to Hudson, for before I understood her mind she had opened the back dining-room window and brought him to his window over the coach-house by the tone of her voice. Her second remark I heard:

"If you do not get out the carriage I will come and get it out myself."

This statement carried conviction to all minds. Evans, who had not even been called, came in crawling, so to speak, before her. She briefly told him to saddle his master's horse for himself. She was out helping to buckle the harness straps as soon as Hudson had got the horse in the shafts, and reappeared, in bonnet and cloak, with flask, biscuit box and lantern in her hands, before Evans had had time, though he worked with despatch, to put up the shutters and bars. The house was left empty, the horses, the dogs, and all of us were upon the road, before even I was able to feel further impatience. Hudson, it is true, was swearing beneath his breath all the way, but Evans had recovered his erect attitude, partly in the need of managing a fresh

horse, but chiefly, I think, because he had forgotten his own apologetic condition in admiration of his mistress.

When we were well on the way Mrs. Prince made her first comment.

"Whether the child, if I may so say, be a gentleman's daughter or not, sir, it should be enough for any of us to know that she was frightened and alone. I hope, sir, it could never be said of me—as I'm sure it could never be said of you or the master—that we left any effort untried when a young girl was in trouble."

I agreed very humbly and gratefully. I was nearly ready to weep with gratitude.

"It might be said, sir, that we should have done better to leave you in the comforts of home, being weak after your fall, but the men will display greater fortitude and patience with you here. Nor could I take the responsibility of taking the carriage, if necessary, about the neighbourhood, without your authority."

Folly, which contrives constantly to mingle itself with hope, gave me a strong expectation of finding the younger girl on the border of the park, not far from the place in which I had left her. An old, grassy lane turned from the highroad across this part of our new farm, and Hudson managed to turn into it and then drive across the field. The old cart-horse was grazing, but no maiden could be seen.

Arrived at the spot, Mrs. Prince lit the lantern, and herself got out and searched about. Evans had galloped to the dairy house, only to return with the

positive assurance that the girls had not gone back there.

We went on to the old low gate that barred the grass-grown road which at this point wound on through the park. It was down this road that Hudson had come that afternoon when he met me with his story of the apparition, and up this road I wanted to drive, with the expectation strong upon me of finding both girls where I had caught sight of the elder going four hours before. We had sent Evans off again to gallop to the other farm which lay two miles away to the north of the park. Hudson, determined not to take that road again and at night, sturdily insisted that the gate, which was fast with a chain, could not be opened. He was standing now at the horse's head, and Mrs. Prince was at the carriage door with the lantern.

To her I appealed. "I saw a beautiful girl walking up that road and crying this afternoon; and her sister said that she had found a hiding-place up there." The sound of my own voice seemed high and thin with distress.

Mrs. Prince took no further notice of Hudson. "Very well, sir; I will get over the gate and walk up the old road with the lantern, if you'll be kind enough to drive round by the high road and in at the main gates, and wait for me by the house."

"You none will," growled Hudson "—not you!"

I leaned eagerly out of the carriage, and when I saw Mrs. Prince clamber over the low gate and trudge along the lane swinging the light of the lantern upon the melancholy copses and the budding

trees, I felt a positive affection for that good woman.

Hudson stood stock still. I feel sure that, had he not been ashamed to confess that he could break open the gate, he would now have followed on Mrs. Prince's track rather than have been worsted in courage and leave her unprotected, a prey to the worst visitation of the supernatural. But I had caught at the advantage of dividing our party and searching in two directions at once, so I insisted on being jolted quickly out of the field, and then we set off at a steady pace up the road, I looking eagerly out on either side for any sign of humanity.

Suddenly Hudson pulled up. A man walking alone approached. Hudson was too uncertain to speak, so the pedestrian was opposite the carriage window before he too stopped.

"Well!" said he, in a tone that certainly was not approving, "where are you going at this time of night?"

It was Helios! He had returned without giving notice, and had chosen to walk from the station, no doubt out of sadness and a sense of having much in common with night and solitude. My heart beat low; I knew that his wife could no longer be alive.

But I seized him by the shoulder, and in words that were spoken with hardly a hope of lucidity, I told him my quest and entreated his help. I think, though Helios would certainly have done more at my request than for anyone else in the world, it was the fact, to which Hudson bore witness, that Mrs.

Prince had gone into the park alone, which prevented the delay of a discussion.

There was a chain on the great gates of North Hay, and Helios joined his force to Hudson's in taking one of them off its hinges. Hudson took this opportunity to vindicate himself.

"Sir," said he, "may I make so bold as to ask if the mistress has gone to a better world?"

I knew very well that my uncle was offended at the question. He would have preferred to tell his news in his own time and way. But after a minute he answered in the affirmative, saying that she whom Hudson had for the first time styled "the mistress" had passed away at noon that day, that he had come down to make arrangements for the funeral at North Hay Church.

"Yes sir," said Hudson; "I knew it was so."

I felt too distressed to explain or contradict Hudson's mysterious words.

So we drove up the great, dark avenue that had so long had a ghostly reputation. It seemed as if we were ourselves a supernatural manifestation, so oddly out of connection with everyday things did it seem to drive to the door of an empty mansion in the dead of night.

How silent it was! We were all subdued by my uncle's news; the horse, with that curious sympathy which horses have for the mood of the driver, stood still without pawing or starting.

Helios, who had alighted with the idea perhaps of pacifying me, went mechanically up the broad stone steps. He had asked me if I thought the girls for

whom I was looking might be in the house ; and I confessed that if I hoped one thing more than another it was that they had found some means of access to it. So when he stood before the door and found it fast, he put his hand to the bell, and the empty rooms resounded to a sudden jingle-jangle that seemed as if it would never be over.

The noise was in horrid discord with our sense of what was fitting. When it died away without evoking any response, the silence was not what it had been—like the natural pall of night, but seemed to vibrate with the sense of imminent fate. Helios was roused to activity.

"You can drive round to the courtyard and the stables, if you like," he said. "I will go round by the gardens."

The first garden opened by a wooden door in a wall on the terrace, and he drew himself up and climbed over this door. Hudson turned on the stately terrace to drive round where for centuries the Girdlestone carriages had been put away after use.

This brought us to a sort of courtyard open to the park in the direction from which Mrs. Prince ought to have been approaching. I leaned out, peering over the open slope and into the woodland. We could have spied the lantern a long way off. I opened the carriage door and got out, and saw that Hudson was craning his neck to look in the same direction.

"Her lantern must have gone out," he said ; "but she had a candle and matches."

Then we both set ourselves to an almost breathless

watching, and perhaps it was five minutes before we spoke again.

"If you can fasten the horse, you had better go down and see what has happened to her," I said.

The yard was shut in on three sides by the high-roofed wing of a modern ball-room built to the old house, the high wall of a garden with a door in it, and the stables. I felt confident of seeing Helios swing himself over this garden door in a minute.

Hudson demurred. He did not see that he could help Mrs. Prince to come walking up to the house; she was quite able to do that without him, and he ought not to leave me.

But when I curtly told him that he was a coward, he started off down the grassy bank without further hesitation. He had gone perhaps forty steps when, to my own amazement, I cried to him in alarm. I think now, looking back, that I probably heard something—voices or feet—from which I unconsciously argued mischief, or perhaps it was some telepathic communication of distress that moved me, but at the time I knew no cause for my panic.

"Come back!" I whispered. "There is something wrong. I am frightened to be here alone."

At which Hudson returned to me, and the ill-humour that had been between us vanished. He stood beside me waiting respectfully.

"Hudson," I whispered, "what do you think can have happened to the master? Why don't we hear him coming?"

At which, without parley, Hudson raised a cheerful shout. "Are you there, sir? Hullo! sir."

The man had a very sturdy voice, and his call awakened the dark buildings and seemed even to stir the high trees and low grasses. A bird chirped at us out of the dark garden. What alarmed us was that we thought we heard my uncle call out, but the voice was interrupted by a door being shut.

"Hullo! sir. Are you there, sir?" Hudson shouted again several times. The sound of his own voice gave him courage, but neither from the wood through which Mrs. Prince ought to be approaching, nor from the dark gardens, did there come any further reply.

"There's mischief up, sir," said Hudson. He was looking about, his mind gone before his words in wondering what to do.

We both had an instinctive feeling that Mrs. Prince, being a woman, ought to be sought first, while our affection turned to Helios.

Hudson, at least, did not hesitate more than a minute between gallantry and love. He helped me up on to the box of the brougham, and before I had caught the reins he was half-way to the gate of the back garden. Then he sprang to the top of the gate, but jumped back again and came quickly to me.

"There's foul play, sir! There's three or four of them. I dursn't leave you here, sir. Drive back down the avenue and shout for Evans."

Even in his haste he took off his hat and scratched his head, as he always did in a dilemma. I knew that the foul four were not ghostly, because he had no longer any fear on his own account but was thinking how best to attack superior numbers.

"Drive free of the house, sir. I'll go back and settle them."

I had no nerve for what he asked of me. There was no moderation in the terror I felt on account of Helios. I pointed to a broken carriage pole, a remnant of the recent sale, lying by the wall. Hudson, only too eager to go, picked it up and left me again. It was heavy, and tipped with a large brass clamp and ring. It would be difficult to climb the gate with it, so he ran and pounded upon it with all his force. The bolt of the old gate gave; it swung back and he was immediately swallowed up in the shadow within.

I heard no scuffle; even his steps I did not hear. The murderous blows he could have dealt would surely have made some sound. This abrupt silence increased my terror. The horse, ill-controlled by my feeble reins, had danced in response to everyone of Hudson's blows. It plunged backwards and forwards, and I brought it to a standstill, pawing and ill content, by the side of the house wall, where I could no longer see the courtyard or the broken gate. Had I had the courage, I would have done as Hudson suggested but I knew that if the horse got its head I could not control it, nor could I make up my mind to leave the spot.

I began to examine the part of the house nearest me. I had never been inside, but I knew the outside well enough to know that I was close to a wing consisting only of a ball-room. The small windows of the basement appeared to belong to cellars. The ball-room windows began on my level and were of twice their usual height, arched at the top, evidently

lighting a lofty hall. At the corner close to me a small circular stairway descended from a door to the drive. I could not but remember that it was in this room that Girdlestone and the bailiff were said to have seen the apparition that Girdlestone, upon reflection, concluded to be his sister; and as I was also now aware that "Anna" had discovered some way of entry to the house, it was easy to suspect that this drawing-room, which was shut off from the rest of the house, might be entered by this stairway from outside. I resolved, when Evans came, to attempt an entrance here, for I was useless in a garden fray, but might discover a terrified refugee in the house and be of use to her. All this flashed through my mind in a sort of aside while I was listening, madly impatient for Evans to come. It could not have been more than a few minutes—it seemed like an hour—before I heard his brisk canter on the avenue, and I threw all the breath I could into a call.

Evans, enjoying his night ride, came cheerfully trotting up the drive. He knew nothing of our recent alarms. "They've not seen anything of the young ladies down there, sir," he called out. An expedition led by Mrs. Prince was nuts to Evans and the object of our search quite secondary. In less desperate circumstances I could have slain him for his cheerfulness.

He drew rein by the carriage, amazed to see me on the box. I explained that we had met his master, and all that had chanced except that Mrs. Prince had not reappeared, a circumstance which I deliberately omitted, as it would have detracted from the useful-

ness of her admirer. As I talked I clambered on to the stairway that led up to the ball-room, and, sitting there, helped Evans to tie the bridles of the horses to its iron railings.

Then Evans went towards the gardens with my stout crutch as an implement of war; it was all I could give to the cause.

I got up the stairs to try the door. Made at first of wood not too dry and exposed to all sun and wind, the door had rather shrunk from its lintel. It did not give to my hand, but seeing that the lock did not catch far in the socket, I began poking at it with my knife, believing that the girls had already in some way opened it. I broke the knife but unbolted the door and got inside.

I was in a lofty hall whose decorated walls and coloured windows gave it, even by moonlight, a glimmering grandeur. The floor was bare. A long low bench ran round the room, and a wooden chair and table, perhaps brought in for the auctioneer at the sale, were the only furniture I could descry. I had ardently hoped that the girls might have secured themselves in this wing, so that the emptiness of the great room was shocking to me, the more because Evans was now lost in the silence as Hudson had been.

I began to go on by aid of the fixed bench. My every step echoed round the empty walls. Perhaps there might be some cupboard, some hiding-place that did not appear. I called out gently to say that I was there, and had come to help anyone in distress. My call only echoed back to me. I reached the

chair, and, pushing it before me, crossed the room, hating every rattle that it made on the floor; but I must get into the main part of the house without delay, and find out what was the matter.

The door was not locked. It opened into a short, wide gallery which ran through the outer wall of the house. Then I found myself in a room like the veritable gate of Hades, the shutters fastened, the darkness deep. I listened and heard some faint sound that might have been voices. I pushed on with feverish haste, and spoke sometimes as I went, challenging the darkness. When I had found and opened the next door I was in the central hall of the house. Above, three stories high, there was a skylight, and on the great staircase were long slits of windows that were not shuttered. The sound I had heard seemed at first to be only the sea wind, coming up from the other side of the house and murmuring against the skylight. I could not hear the impatient stamping of the horses. I had lost my bearings, and did not now know on what side of me the ball-room lay; and so curious are the acoustic properties of an empty building that when I again heard, as I soon did, the sound of men's voices, it seemed to come from upstairs.

Up I went as fast as I might. On the first landing the broad flight of steps divided into two, and on the wall hung a picture I could only dimly discern in the black depths of its frame—a nude figure standing in alert attitude, god or goddess, too worthless to pay for removal. Going on, I reached an upper passage, and again heard voices as if at its other end. The

passage narrowed as I went along it, and the floor sloped downwards and then undulated, so that I knew I was in a very old part of the house. Obligated to hold hard by the wall, I opened each door as I came to it and looked in. The cumulative effect of those dark rooms was very depressing; the faint glimmer through the chinks of their shutters was just sufficient to people each with a thousand ghosts had I determined to see them. At length I reached the end, where I found a lattice window had been left partially open. I could now hear footsteps and voices plainly, but they were in the garden below. I think, although I had begun with so valiant a contempt of apparitions, I would really rather have found a whole roomful of armed men at that point in my pilgrimage than become convinced, as I instantly did, that the noise all came through the window and I was alone in the house.

If I could have gone back quickly I should not have given my situation much thought, but progress to a lame man without a crutch is ill-going, and fatigue forced me to sit a while on the low window seat. I could not lean out to see, for it was only the upper part of the latticed window that opened. I curled up in the window to regain strength, my back aching fiercely and my nerves tense.

I looked and looked into the darkness, trying to make out the different sizes of the doors, the different levels of the passage. A rat or a mouse stirred and squeaked near me, either within or without the wainscot. I drew up my feet and clasped my arms about my knees, and there, in the house that had so long had

The Spanish Dowry

the reputation of being the theatre of knocks, lights, and ghostly essences, I was forced to rest until had it been possible for any creature from the unseen to make himself audible or apparent through the crevices of senses racked with pain and a mind weakened by unbridled anxiety I should have been the subject of his visitation. But no sound except the sea-breeze murmuring on the southern walls, or the scuttle of mice, now came to me ; and I saw nothing for all my peering into the darkness, but the uncertain interior outlines of the empty house.

Yet had I had eyes to see the real ghosts of the place I should have seen the demons of pride and avarice fighting together—obstinate pride strutting on the stage whenever it could claim a living puppet, obstinate avarice animating whatever flesh would lend it breath. I should have seen into the past, when, in this very place, these forces met in the strong man and woman who had determined the type of the subsequent generations. I should have seen a man by nature well equipped with strength and talents, a successful man of the world, pacing this very floor day by day, chafed by an angry wife for whose grace he would not sue. I should have seen the wife, sad and beautiful enough, but eager for power and finery, refusing to be reconciled even when death stalked between them, dying with triumphant defiance on her beautiful face.

We knew afterwards that it was the secret and obstinate search of avarice, still trying to outwit the silence of pride, that had been the real haunting of North Hay in our time—avarice now in that violent

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mar., Ralph Girdlestone, pride in that injured woman, my uncle's beautiful wife. For Girdlestone knew that his sister had seen the jewels in their hiding, and no persecution of his had moved her from her purpose to give them to Helios, every one.

But I must now tell how that haunting came to an end that night, and what, as I afterwards learnt, had befallen Helios.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SQUIRE'S FAREWELL

THERE were three old gardens belonging to North Hay, and each was well walled from the sea winds. Helios, having got himself over the wall of the first, made his way in the darkness across to a second wall, which sheltered the middle garden. No doubt before he reached it he realised that this was the garden that his wife had cultivated during her two years of solitary life there. He was about to leap the second gate when he saw it ajar, and entering, was amazed to find himself in the midst of a group of men who had been delving hard with pick and spade. About half of the garden had been reduced to the condition of rough ploughed land. He was surrounded and threatened by armed men, one of whom was Girdlestone himself.

He was less concerned when he recognised Girdlestone, thinking that, whatever his business there, he was much too cowardly and too shrewd to get himself into a more incriminating position; but the climax of the intruder's surprise was to find that Girdlestone and his followers were entirely convinced that his errand there was to circumvent theirs. They

took him into a room of the house which opened on this garden. When they heard Hudson's first shout, several of the men went to meet him, the rest guarding Helios.

It was a most fortunate thing that Hudson did not brain two or three of them with the murderous club I had provided. They had been cautious enough to dig a soft, muddy trench before the garden entrance, in case of surprise, and all they did now was to retreat behind it, and, when Hudson floundered in mud and darkness, to pour into his wrathful soul a sufficient light of reason concerning their superior strength to prevent violence. What they could not do was to persuade him to lay down his weapon, so he proved a fearful object, clad in mud, club in hand, the centre of the group outside the window where Helios was imprisoned; some of the night party pointed their pistols at him. Evans avoided the trench and sneaked into the garden, but seeing the situation, walked into shelter until he could contrive an effective demonstration.

This garden was the only hiding-place which Girdlestone had not been able to thoroughly search for the hidden jewels during his last month's ownership of North Hay.

The oddest thing about the situation was that when Helios understood that Girdlestone was asking him the whereabouts of the Spanish dowry, he could not say that he did not know where it was. He had no evidence that it was identical with the parcel of jewels left in his own safe, but it was impossible to doubt this. Had he denied all

knowledge, as he had done a week before, no doubt Girdlestone would have believed him again. There are few things more pathetic than the faith liars place in the word of an upright man.

I learned afterwards that his dying wife had not had strength to tell Helios her story, so that when confronted with these searchers he sat for a good time, apparently simply obstinate, but in reality trying to think who the young women could be who had discovered this secret, had outwitted Girdlestone and brought the jewels to Lone End. This was his first consideration, because he was most anxious, remembering my distressed report, to protect the girls, and seeing that Girdlestone was reckless, could not make up his mind whether there was more risk in betraying their probable presence to him, or, should he know their whereabouts, in losing the chance of enquiring who and where they were.

All this time Hudson, who could see Helios through the window, waited his signal in patience, and Evans, reconnoitring from an ambush, was as yet unheard.

After waiting with impatience Girdlestone burst out.

"Look here!" said he; "we may as well come to plain dealing. You know as well as I do that there was a great-grandmother of mine here once who hid her jewels— Oh, you don't believe it, do you? No fool does; but all the same, there have been a few sane ancestors of mine who knew that a fortune in precious stones couldn't have been disposed of without leaving some record in the jewel market of

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the time. I, at any rate, have always known they were somewhere on this property, and I have searched pretty well, too, all my life; but I've never been such a fool as to think because they weren't found they weren't there. So when we all bundled off to America, I did one thing—I set a fellow to keep his eye on the market for these things. Well, the Oldhams being a parcel of sheep, were not likely to get hold of them if we couldn't; but my precious sister comes back here all by herself—then, what do I hear? That a pearl is sold by you for fifty guineas, that it would have been worth twice that price if it had not been damaged by time. Next I hear that this sister of mine is going to be married to you. I stopped her little game, and then I promised her that if she'd tell me where that stone came from, and give me the rest, I'd tell her all she wanted to know about her husband and children. Well, even for that she wouldn't tell. Wasn't that proof she had found good value? She's kept her own counsel. And she hasn't sold them; and she hasn't put them in any bank; Newberry hasn't got them; you haven't got them; therefore I say they are here still. She has not dared to touch them after my threat. Her only safety was to let them be. I made sure when I brought the girls over that I was turning a screw that would make her tell me where they were. But you bet on a woman being both obstinate and a fool. She's in love, and bent on leaving all she has to leave—mind you, that again proves she has something to leave—away from her own flesh and blood and to you. Do I suppose, if she dies and

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leaves a nice little letter for you saying where they are, I shall be at the valuing of them? And I know that sort of property is very easily slipped up the sleeve of the person who gets at it first. Who's to know how many there are, and what they are worth? No; I'm here now to find them; and now that I've come across you, you'll either bring them out, or swear that when you do come by them you'll go shares."

At the end of this long speech Helios spoke with terse severity, telling him that his sister was already dead.

Girdlestone received the news with a gasp of anger. He knew, although we did not, the tenour of his sister's will. While she lived he hoped to subdue her by the threat of injuring her daughters; but her death would have transferred the jewels to an owner over whom, in ordinary circumstances, he had no power. For a moment he staggered; then he perceived that, by an extraordinary accident, the new owner was at that moment in his power. With an oath he declared that Helios should not leave the place till he had signed an agreement to share the jewels, reminding him with a sneer that he could never prove that he had been robbed, as no one believed in their value or knew their quantity, and he and his men could be far away before pursuit could be made.

Now the interesting point in this story is that if my pretty maiden had not brought the jewels to Lone End, if we had not made an inventory and put them in the county bank, Helios would have

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had a bad hour before him ; and as we do not know who Girdlestone had with him, we cannot tell what the result of the struggle might have been. It was owing to the impulsive action of a generous child that Helios could declare that the precious stones were already in his bank, with an inventory legally witnessed.

It all seemed half farcical at the moment, but knowing as we now do that Girdlestone was not sane in his fixed idea of the enormous value of the jewels, and that his desperate search had convinced more than one money-lender of the existence of this fabulous wealth, it is impossible to look back without feeling very glad that the case was such as to prove to them that there was nothing to be gained by violence. He and his party agreed that the game was up.

They gathered in a very surly manner, and began shouldering their tools to return the way they had come. Helios stood leaning against the garden door, for the sister's sake letting them go in peace. They were going to a boat moored on the river-bank.

Girdlestone had sufficient trace of good sense and manners about him to endeavour to take leave with some sort of apology, saying that he supposed, as it could do no one any good, Mr. Ferguson would not make public his whereabouts till he had had time to get out of the country again.

"And the two girls?" said Helios, in quiet inquiry.

"What about them?" cried Girdlestone impatiently.

"Who are they? I do not understand."

"And *where* are they?" cried he, with a sneer and a rough laugh. "I've been playing the father to them: I can tell you when you find them you'll have your hands full!"

He turned to march after the party, who were disappearing in the darkness, but after a stride or two came back. Helios was still at the door of the garden parlour, looking through the dimness at the utter desolation of a garden which had once been the only joy and comfort of a desolate woman's heart. Beside him stood Hudson, leaning upon his giant's club like a moody Samson.

Girdlestone stopped, kicked the ground with a nervous foot, and then said:

"Before God, Ferguson, I don't know where they are. I got them to France all right, and thought I'd have them safe in case they were wanted for a pleasant surprise; but they're gone, and so is the old lady; and whether back to the Gulf of Mexico or not I don't know. But you needn't try to catch me again, with the notion that I can find them, for they've got away from me. If they hadn't, I'd have got the better of my poor sister before now."

CHAPTER XXV

A SAFE REFUGE

BUT the maidens for whose safety I held myself responsible were not found. We who had come to look for them got together again, and silence which fell again on bower and hall, garden and grove, carried the conviction that in this quarter our quest was vain.

When Evans had brought back my crutch and we had turned the brougham, Mrs. Prince appeared, walking up from the river by the path of Girdlestone's retreat. Upon first entering the park at the lower gate she had heard the movement of oars on the river, and wondering if the girls were attempting to cross, she had diverged to the river-bank. There she had found a man keeping a boat afloat abreast the current. She mistook him for the Portuguese, and told him whom she sought.

The one incident of all that time which has never been explained, which still remains a perfect enigma, is the incident of this man and the tale he told. Even now I make our housekeeper repeat the story; it is short; it has not grown with years. In my mind I still see him as she described him that night. There

was a dark boat on a dark flood ; and the figure within pulled a constant, regular stroke seaward to counteract the incoming tide. She, with her lantern, stood on a landing-stone in a gap in the willow fringes. It would seem that this man must have been one of Girdlestone's gang ; no other boat was seen by which they could have come and gone ; but the things he told were not such as might have been expected from such a man, nor indeed, from any other unless he were one who thought himself subject to dreams or the influx of thoughts from other minds.

When Mrs. Prince first told us, Evans and I left Hudson slapping the pawing horses and knotting a broken rein, and went with her to find Helios. He had not moved from the inner garden, but waited where Girdlestone had left him, looking at the desolation, spell-bound, no doubt, by the compassionate memories which the place awoke.

Mrs. Prince began in haste and stumbled on.

"I, having asked the man if he knew where the young ladies were, and finding he wasn't the poor Portuguese, he said, speaking up quite clear, that when he was looking down into the water before the sun set, he had seen them."

"I do not understand," said Helios.

"You're naturally flustered, ma'am," said Evans. "Take your time. Indeed, sir, the man seems to have been sent providential, for he did tell her how to avoid the blackguards you've just ordered off."

"No, h'Evans," replied Mrs. Prince. "I'm not disturbed, for he said the pretty lambs were quite

safe, and in a kind house ; but he said it so odd, as if he had seen it all going on reflected in the water as he looked in it. He said he saw the young ladies I wanted lying in white beds, and a kind lady being a mother to them, and that I would soon see them myself. But he went on to say that the little one had her hand full of gems—both hands full—and she would marry one that had his hands full of them ; but the other had only flowers in her hand, and she would marry the land."

"He was talking only to keep you from coming up to the house and giving the alarm," said Helios.

"He spoke very earnest, and told me to tell the masters that the aged lady had been hurt in a great town, and lay between life and death ; and he bid me tell you to seek her first, for youth and beauty would always be served, but age needed care."

Whether Helios had a mind free enough to perceive that this story trenched on matters which Mrs. Prince had not otherwise heard of I cannot tell. The tale impressed me strongly, but he paid no attention.

Evans broke in. "And if he was one of the gang, sir, he had a right way of thinking of a lady alone in the night, for he bid her put out the light and stand back in the trees where she was, a bit up the slope ; and, doing so, she was not spoken to by the blackguards, sir."

Helios turned on me. "What made you think there were any girls here ? Who were they ? What do you know about them ?"

I told him my adventure of the afternoon. I did

not tell him the relation they bore to himself—that night I dare not, in case they were not found.

Hudson was sent to find the boat belonging to the Dairy Farm and seek along the banks. Helios took his horse from Evans and went up the road to go by the bridge to the convent farm, in case they had walked that way. I was taken home to keep house with the dogs; and then Mrs. Prince, escorted by Evans, proceeded to the village.

They were the first to come back, and with news that was not more surprising than comforting to my repentant heart.

"It's wonderful, sir, I always will say, what an instinct sweet young things have of doing the right thing in trouble, although they don't know what they fear or why they trust one more than another. I always do believe, sir, that the angels of God whisper to them when they're in straits. There they were, sir, lying as sweet and comfortable as young ladies need to be in the old nursery at the rectory, the elder one ill with pain and fever, and the rector's wife sitting beside her like a mother with jelly and all such things as young ladies need; and it was herself who came to the door on hearing our knocks in the street."

After that night, when Mrs. Prince forgot her elegance of speech and all punctuation, I could always be chummy with her, for I knew we had touched bottom and found ourselves on common ground.

"I can't believe it!" I cried. "Not of Lady High Feather. Will she go on being nice to them?"

"Well, sir, I put it to you, although Evans tells me that you and the master do laugh at her bonnets—how could a woman see them so touching in their outlandish gentilities, if I may say so, and not make much of them?"

I had only time then to pick up the phrase and pocket it. How Helios and I twitted them joyfully many a day with their "outlandish gentilities," but at the moment I snarled jealously:

"I do not know why she should speak of them as odd—that was more like her than kind. English is not their language—they have evidently only heard it from workmen. They have been educated in Spanish."

"The rector's lady didn't tell me more about them than whisper to me that their parents were Protestant, although they were left with the nuns by a Popish grandmother, and put out to hard labour; but I was wanting to see them, not hoping with less to satisfy Mr. Ferguson of their comfort. So I tiptoed in; and she that is ill, lying there like a court beauty on her pillow, says so sweetly to me: 'You boss the show down to Lone End, don't you?' Well, sir, I had to smile, it was so unexpected, and I wouldn't have mentioned it if the rector's lady hadn't laughed too—but all in kindness. And the little one was lying with her beautiful hair over the pillow all asleep. At the door the lady asked me who the young ladies are, but I couldn't tell that. It seems she and the rector have made out that there's some relation between them and Mrs. Ferguson. Of course I don't understand—how should I?—but

that being so, it was fitting we took the carriage."

"You must be very tired, Mrs. Prince. You have helped beautifully."

But at this she bridled. I saw that her head was about to prance and her speech to resume its usual elegance. I felt I could only be grateful while the hour's lack of punctuation and false aspirates endured.

I thought of Helios riding—riding, the length of the night, of Hudson rowing dismally beside black alder holts and ghostly willow fringes. I was so angry with myself for being the cause of the night's turmoil that I could not help telling her rather sharply to go down to the worshipful Evans, who I doubted not had prepared the best of the larder for her supper.

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CHAPTER XXV

THE SECOND THERESA

THE next day remains in my memory as a mixed-up and troublesome day.

Helios was very sad indeed. I knew this because he tried to act in an ordinary manner. He didn't succeed in the least; he was neither impatient nor amusing; nor did he complain, which, as everyone knows, delightful people naturally do to that degree which is agreeable to their friends. The fact that he could be so unnaturally urbane without perceiving the inanity of his conduct proved to me that his mind was elsewhere, that his heart was sore with thoughts that lay too deep for sign of grief. I thought there was no prospect of relief but in that slow process of time against which my heart rebelled.

When he was told that the girls we had been looking for were safe, that indeed the French nuns, whom his last night's visit had alarmed, were disputing with Lady High Feather concerning their custody, he forgot their existence.

Since the validity of her marriage had been proved nothing had been left undone which could exonerate Mrs. Ferguson's memory from such unkind suspicions

as might be provoked by the silence she had herself imposed. There are times when the acknowledged media of gossip can be employed with advantage if employed with skill. Even in the stupor of distress in which Helios had gone up to town, he had not omitted a note to Mr. Carp. Lawless had said, "Write to Carp; he can manage it." For some days now the whole county had understood how far Mrs. Ferguson had suffered from the Western marriage law and her brother's villainy. Had they only heard of her suffering, their interest would have been lukewarm, but little Carp managed better than that. By first directing all their energy of disapproval against the brother, he produced a reverence for the injured sister which was quite dramatic.

The announcement of her death was in the papers that morning, and carriages came, one by one, to Lone End, solemnly to leave cards of sympathy for Helios, which were grateful only as marks of respect for the dead lady whom, till a few day ago, everyone had maligned.

And with regard to this dead lady, whom by ties of relationship I am bound to respect, I would point out that, whether by inheritance or environment, she was in the world like some too delicate hybrid flower, having most unusual perfections, but lacking more ordinary qualities which by their easy adjustment to the strong forces of life would have caused her to thrive. The bitter experiences of her early life while they taught her patience and self-denial to a degree seldom seen, took from so fragile a character that faith in the everyday, ordinary goodness of

God and man which is necessary for the enjoyment of any pleasure. Joy of certain exalted kinds we think she could apprehend, but not those common pleasures which chiefly operate to endear heart to heart in their mutual enjoyment.

She read the heart of Helios, as we now know, in the hour of their marriage and separation, and perceiving that he was animated rather by compassion than affection, she conceived that her love for him was better expressed by withholding, during her life, the clue by which she could, and afterwards did, prove the validity of his marriage, and by bequeathing to him the fortune which she might have bestowed. When, in America, she discovered that her daughters were alive, she at once determined that their happy youth should not be warped by a knowledge of her existence, which would have involved a knowledge of what she considered her disgrace. With a mind so inflexibly bent on martyrdom, it was little wonder that death soon found her; and as she appears to have been very free from the subtle deceits of egotism, we may believe that she reaped something, even while she lay a-dying, of the joy of honest sacrifice. Who shall say how far she was right or wrong in the choice of blessings she made for those whom she certainly dearly loved? Yet I cannot but thank God that, although few of us could match her in patience and self-denial, there is in most women a more blessed aptitude for crying out when they are hurt, and insisting, within certain limits, upon getting what they want.

The Spanish Dowry

Her eldest daughter, as has been noted, bore a likeness to her in looks and, as it proved, in character; but her youngest child did not take after her, and that was clearly shown to us before the end of that sad day—the first after her mother's death.

I shall never forget how suddenly she burst upon our gloom. Helios, overwrought and indifferent to my presence, was at his desk, but with his head leaning on his hand, and I was tormenting my mind with the fear that when he must know that my pearl maidens were his step-daughters he would be fretted beyond measure by their inexplicable situation.

Thus we were sitting heavily, and a spring gale was eddying round the house, flouting us at every window, and the waves were complaining. The trees and shrubs bent to the wind, which the missel-thrush withstood, piping away. Then, all of a sudden, she was standing in the room with us, having come in with a gust. There she was, as fresh and crisp and careless of the storm as the daffodil buds without. She took no notice of me, but turned to Helios, who, lifting his head, saw her for the first time. He was startled almost into a smile by so perfect an image of youth and vigour and beauty. Her eyes were red with tears, and they were also flashing with anger, but neither of these emotions were allowed for a moment to interfere with her business-like purpose. How well I now understand, knowing her character, just how, childish as her method was, her whole being was intent, not upon idle reproaches, but upon righting a wrong!

She addressed Helios in words fast and impetuous.

"You are a hard man," she said. "You have neglected our mother, who loved you. I have only now heard of it. That is done, and can't be helped. Now you must take care of us, and you must find grandmother at once. I have come to stay here until you find grandmother. My sister will not come, but I shall stay to see that you look alive about finding her."

It might almost be said that she glared at Helios as she said these words with lofty decision.

As for me, although I was less surprised than Helios, I could not say a word, just because she was so absolutely lovely in her weather-browned health, elasticity of strength, and ignorant speech.

"Poor mother!" she went on. "I never saw her, but at the rectory they have told us how cruelly you sent her away. They tell me now that she is dead, and that you will give her a fine funeral to make up. You need not. I am sure she wouldn't care for it; but she would care for us to find grandmother. You must"—she stamped her foot—"you must take care of Anna and me, and find grandmother—you must!"

Again she stamped her foot just as squirrels do when, safe upon a tree, they turn and scold a dog who has chased them.

Helios was awaking gradually from dull pain, like a sun rising above the fogs of night. He stood regarding her with more and more careful attention. Although he must, of course, have known that this was the maiden of the pearls, I could not wonder that he was greatly puzzled. The white under-frock

The Spanish Dowry

like that of the working novice, the close white cap tied under the chin, were like nothing so much as the garments one sees in the Flemish pictures of the Middle Ages. She had left her black cloak and hood somewhere, as she loved to do. Her skirt was wet with the spring showers; her coarse convent shoes worn out, even showing glimpses here and there of a pink foot.

"My child," said Helios, "who are you?"

"You know very well who I am!" she said.

"You need not make any gentlemanly pretence to me. Grandmother wrote to you who we were, and why we were here, and yet you never came to help us. You never told that woman that she must behave properly; but now you shall, for I shall make you."

Tears came rolling over her pink cheeks like balls of light. She only swallowed hard, not raising a hand; and then addressed herself to her subject at another point, like a little ship that, labouring against the wind, turns when she has gone as far as she dare in one direction, staggers, and lifts herself on another tack.

"You know where grandmother is! You are keeping her some place with our trunks and all our clothes. I suppose you thought that we wanted poor mother's precious stones, that we wouldn't have given them to you if you hadn't imprisoned granny. We didn't want them, and neither did she. We despise that sort of thing in our country."

Oh, the loftiness with which she held up her shapely head, and sniffed with her pretty nose in the air, to

show how far above the pomps and vanities of wealth she was accustomed to live.

"Grandmother wouldn't have touched a penny of yours, and neither would we; and you've had the old things for a week—now, anyway. Or are you thinking that we have kept back some of them?" She paused only a moment to question him in imperious tone, then went on. "Father may have done wrong in his life—grandmother says he did—but he would never have made two girls and an old lady miserable for the sake of making his own pile bigger. Father was a Spanish gentleman and well descended; he never cared about making a pile."

The little modern slangs in foreign accent that crept out so frequently from under the mediæval vestments, and flung themselves with such vehement purpose at Helios like stones from a sling, in some magical way brought the giant down from his high grief more quickly than I expected. He fairly smiled outright.

He raised his eyebrows at the uncouth costume and insistent face that seemed to have been made rather for kisses and jewels than for such severe vestments and angry talk, then asked:

"Who is it that you are calling 'mother'? Why do you say 'mother'? The lady who died yesterday cannot be your mother."

Never was a man more astonished than Helios when she held up her head, saying proudly:

"I am her youngest daughter; I am Theresa Roy.

He laid a hand upon her shoulder. "Is that true?" he asked slowly.

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But the moment she felt his gentleness she fell into an abandonment of tears and could not speak.

He stood looking at her with a world of conflicting emotions shown in his attitude. His heart took greedily to the belief that there was still something he could do for the wife just dead. I need not have kept back for so many hours all that I knew of their story. The mere fact—which in dying she had told him—that she had given him all she possessed, had only increased his sorrow until he discovered the significance of Girdlestone's last farewell, and knew that, in every sense, he had his hands full.

Theresa's tears disturbed us greatly, for she would not be comforted—or Helios did not know how to do it. I was sitting near the window, and wishing I were outside of it, when I saw the rector and the rector's wife coming up the drive. I was sure, by a glance at Lady High Feather's bonnet, that she was coming after her runaway charge, and also to tidy us up mentally and spiritually, as a man may tidy up his desk. They entered the house while Helios was still absorbed in trying to soothe the angry girl; but it never occurred to me that Lady High Feather would have the audacity to come into our room. We possessed a thing called a drawing-room, which Mrs. Prince kept in order for such occasions as this. But into our room she came!

I've never been able to explain to myself the way that women attach themselves so easily to women. I am aware that a large number of quotations, and a great majority of books, take the reverse for granted, and assert it as cheerfully as everyone used to assert

the flatness of the earth, or the daily scamper of the sun, or that the world was made in six days, or that the atom was the ultimate division of matter. I can only say that I have never observed the tendency of women to quarrel with one another, except in the case of that particular class of women whose one aim in life is to monopolise the admiration of men; but when you come to think that most men fall a prey to the influence of this class of women sooner or later, and that literature until recently has been created by men, the mistake which the world has made in this matter is perhaps excusable.

In any case, to our great astonishment, no sooner had Lady High Feather entered the room under her nodding plumes than the electrical disturbance, which had almost made the hairs of the hearthrug stand on end, ceased. She put her arm round Theresa, who began at once to weep more quietly, courting her caresses. Lady High Feather drew the girl to her breast and glared over the drooping head at Helios; and Theresa will always love her, spite of years of remonstrance from me.

Nor have I ever been able to understand why the girls went to the rectory on the previous night. It was a curiously instinctive concession on their part to conventions which they did not understand and had never been accustomed to consider. Thither they went, in clothes ill-fitted to conciliate the mistress, and with a story so surprising that, had they paused to consider, they could hardly have expected it to be believed. The rector, indeed, as he afterwards confessed, had not believed it; but his

wife, looking into their sad, young eyes, and urging on their simple confidences by adroit questions, experienced no shadow of dubiety. She took up the position that "according to their light"—it was a favourite phrase of hers—they had acted with singular propriety and courage, and were worthy of every kindness she could bestow—antecedent, I suppose, to their further enlightenment. Helios and I often repeated to each other this amazing clemency on the part of Lady High Feather, and decided that we would never again assume that we knew what was in the heart of woman.

One thing was clear—the girls had no arts by which to soften or modulate the sharp edges of the doings to which they confessed, and were too ignorant of our ways of thinking to conform to them in any way. One detail concerning their walk in the dark to the rectory wounded my vanity very much, and indeed I feel very sore about it still. It appears that it was almost an hour after leaving me in the birch wood before Theresa found Anna, and they set out toward the village. The high road at night had terrors of the unknown for them that field and river, horses and labourers, had not. They had hardly reached the road before they were accosted by a man inquiring his way. His accent told them at once that he was an American. Why should that cause them to assume that he was a deliverer? If I met an Englishman in New York, I should not at once conclude that he was my friend. But they—foolish ones!—so far from telling him his way, told him theirs, and begged his escort to the village. This,

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then, was our American agent, who afterwards feigned to believe me when I said that I had them in safe keeping at Lone End. As we afterwards discovered, he had seen them safely inside the rectory door before he came to prosecute his inquiries as to affairs at the Dairy Farm, where he had fixed to meet Lawless.

How I hate that benevolent man of slow and serene demeanour whenever I think of this! Yet one grace he had, and because of it I have endeavoured not to be revengeful overmuch — he did not tell this circumstance to Lawless.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE LONELY GRAVE

IT was by Mrs. Ferguson's wish that Helios had arranged that she should be buried in the tiny plot, fenced about, in which her great-grandmother, the Spanish lady, had been laid alone. Newberry was to come down the next night, bringing with him the dead, and Helios had arranged for us to meet him at the station in the early morning, and proceed at once to the graveyard, where the simple funeral would take place in the first sweet hour of the day's sunshine, before the merely idle and curious were abroad. It was a pleasure to him that several elderly gentlemen, who had known the old Squire before his downfall, met us at the grave. And the fisherfolk, who were all attached to Helios, came, and the poor preacher from the little Nonconformist chapel over the hill, high and low meeting together to hear the rector read the service; and Helios and I after that hour had a heightened respect for the rector, because he remembered so vividly the service he had read the last time he and this poor lady had met in this place that he hesitated, and was unable to read easily, and indeed at one part almost failed.

The Lonely Grave

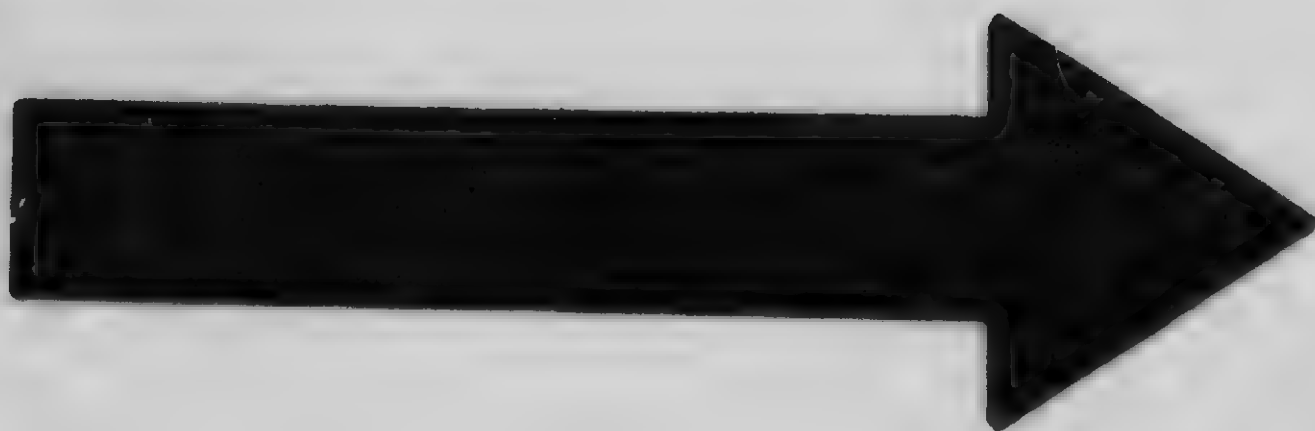
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As to Helios, he looked like a man turned to stone, until some of the fisher-women came forward to scatter in the grave large posies of snowdrops and primroses, which it must have taken long to gather, and the girls, wide-eyed with excitement and wonder, were brought forward by the rector's wife to look down upon the flowers before the earth fell. The lady herself, who was weeping very heartily, had in some way contrived to clothe the girls so suitably that they made a fresh appeal to his heart in the accustomed garb of gentle womanhood. He lost then his stony look, but his suffering had been so obvious that Theresa, moved by a sudden penitent impulse, left her sister and slipped her little hand within his.

It was not until all this was over, and we had returned to Lone End, that Helios really gave his mind to any mere curiosity concerning the situation of the girls. When Mr. Newberry and he examined the papers of the dead lady, they found a reticent statement, dated at the time of her last return from America, telling when and where her first husband had died, where, on a Mexican ranch, she had found his mother domiciled, and the fact that her eldest and youngest daughters were still alive; but she added that while they were children they were better off in their grandmother's charge than in any home it would be in her power to provide for them. She stated that the grandmother herself had been remarried to a very respectable Mexican named Rodriguez.

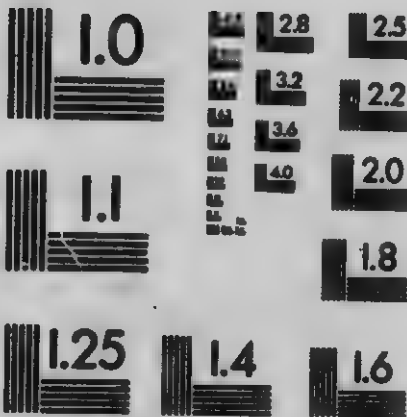
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The Spanish Dowry

Madame Rodriguez, dating from the time of Mrs Ferguson's visit to within the last three months, in which she gave the unfortunate mother an account of all that befell her girls. With these was a will giving a curious statement as to the exact whereabouts of a sealed metal box which she claimed as her share of family possessions. This she bequeathed to Helios.

We gathered afterwards that when Girdlestone, who kept a detective on his sister's track, was rendered desperate by her critical state of health, he conceived the idea of obtaining her obstinate secret by getting her daughters into his power and advertising the land for immediate sale. He believed that by the double pressure of representing to her that the hidden hoard would become the property of the next owner if not removed before the sale, and by claiming it on behalf of her daughters, who were in his care, he might finally wring from her what he desired before death sealed her lips. He knew, apparently from her own statement, that as soon as she was dead the secret would be declared and the jewels belong to Helios.

All this shows that Girdlestone had not, any more than his sister, an ordinary set of thoughts and emotions. His mental shortcomings revealed themselves in greed, hers in a proud abnegation; but he was the more stupid. The purblind optimism of the confirmed speculator caused him to exaggerate enormously the probable or possible value of the lost jewels, and his conviction enabled him to infect others who had money to spend with the craze of the search, and gave him courage to carry out his long scheme.

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Girdlestone had not previously made himself known to Roy's mother, and supposing that she would have been warned by his sister against him, he arrived unexpectedly at the Rodriguez ranch under the name of Ferguson, declaring himself the step-father of the girls, come to take them in haste to see their mother before she died. Madame Rodriguez had heard all praise of my uncle's character; it was natural enough that they should believe Girdlestone's story. With simple good feeling and generosity the voyage was hastily arranged.

It was only gradually, by observation of Girdlestone on shipboard, although he probably behaved better than ever in his life before, that Madame Rodriguez came to have a much lower opinion of him.

His plan was to leave her and the girls on the continent, where none but himself would know where to find them. When they reached the mouth of the Loire, having come by a French steamer, he left them in a small and respectable inn in a country village, never doubting that the grandmother was still as open with him as at first. His fox-like mind relied upon the transparent goodness of her nature, and supposed, as such minds commonly do, that simplicity of nature betrays a simpleton's lack of wit.

No sooner was she left alone with her precious charge than Madame Rodriguez hid the girls in a convent, and lost no time in travelling to London and obtaining a private interview with her daughter-in-law. Between them they discovered Girdlestone's plot and read his motives. Frightened of his unscrupulous cunning, Mrs. Ferguson, who never 'acked

discernment, decided that the girls should be removed to the nun's settlement near us—the last place where Girdlestone would expect to find them, and the only place where, if he did, they could appeal to Helios at an hour's notice. The plan was as bold as it would have been successful had it not been for an accident. Mrs. Ferguson also told where the jewels were in hiding, and begged her mother-in-law to have an eye to their safety.

It was after this visit that the elder Theresa had re-opened the packet of papers before described, and added another to the effect that she gave God thanks that a malicious scheme to injure her children had been overruled, that she had had great joy in seeing their grandmother, learning so intimately of their well-being, and feeling that the hand of God had brought them to this country where, on her death, they would be introduced to the guardianship of her husband. She confessed that she had conceived a great desire to die before the validity of her marriage was made known to her husband, her children introduced to his care, and her faults and misfortunes necessarily made known to them. She had besought her mother-in-law to wait in patience, knowing that her death was very near.

This was the last record the poor lady made. Perhaps she feared lest Helios should refuse the charge she gave him if she were still alive, and thought the intrusion of her sad history would be irksome to their healthy youth. If so, she little knew either the generosity of Helios or the tender hearts of her children.

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We know no more than this of her part in the story, except that she expected to see her mother-in-law again, and did not, and that when she was sinking, the doctors, knowing life could not be prolonged, introduced Helios to her presence.

He was with her for the last three days; and although she did not tell him anything, knowing that such effort would end the few hours of life that remained to her, she seems to have experienced nothing but bliss after his coming, taking that unexpected delight as a sign that all else would be well.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A PROPHET AND A FAMILY JAR

AFTER the funeral Helios was willing to receive Lawless and his American detective. I did not know then the latter's deep cunning of the previous evening, so I was still kindly disposed toward him.

Lawless was deeply chagrined that the information he had so carefully raked together by this agent should have been brought to our doors at the same time through natural channels. I think he never realised that it had made a world-full of difference to Helios to know the one essential point of his marriage in those few short days he spent with his dying wife; but the American, an old man and silent, I think perceived this cause for gratitude, which Helios would never have suggested to men whom he met only on a business footing.

In any case, the American, quite undisturbed, took out his long, flat note-book, and read us his reports as succinctly set down at each date and place since the beginning of his journey of inquiry.

He had first found the home of Roy's parents. In the flux and becoming of an American frontier town, few traces of them were left. Examining into these,

he came on Girdlestone's double track, which he did not understand until he reached the Rodriguez ranch, where he arrived too late, only to hear about the daughters and the story of their departure for Europe. Without waiting for instruction, he followed in hot haste upon their track to France, to London, on to our neighbourhood. It was from his later notes that we gathered such part of the story as was now of pressing interest to us. I will tell it, however, with some detail of an after-knowledge that came to us by degrees.

It appeared that the little lady grandmother's first and only interview with her dying daughter-in-law had necessarily been so restrained that there had been no discussion of ways and means. After leaving the sick-room, she saw the task imposed upon her in an aspect which was, perhaps, natural to a mind accustomed to early border life in Mexico, but which seemed odd to us. She regarded all men as living under the law of might, whether of money or wit or physical daring. She supposed Girdlestone, in his own country, to wield those three sources of power, and had no conception that English law would defend the rights of aliens against a man so important and belligerent. She was not cast down, but cheerfully laid her plans according to her fears. In Paris she went to the parent house of the order to which our agricultural sisters belonged, and obtained, perhaps at the cost of some gold, a letter which caused our hard-working neighbours to be willing to aid her plans as far as she explained them. She dressed her girls in an outward garb, not the same as that worn

by the novices of the order, but so far like that an eye blinded by Protestant error would not be troubled by the difference. She brought them thus garbed to the nun's farm, and set them to work demurely in the lighter branches of farm labour. She came over the river to visit us, to form her own opinion of Helios. Had her opinion been adverse, I think, in spite of their mother's wish, she would have made off with her girls to the Mexican ranch. Fortunately, my lively conversation and the sterling qualities of Helios won her favour. I do not wish to suggest that the girls had meekly rendered a puppet-like obedience; no one who knew them could expect this; the dear old lady, telling what she might of their situation, fired their hearts so that, as long as she was at hand, they were animated by a spirit of adventure—excited, now by real fear of the wicked man who had duped them, now by romantic interest in the mysterious guardian to whom they were to apply in extremity, and wholly fascinated by the story of the hidden treasure.

Had the grandmother's plan been carried out, the girls would have passed the remaining weeks of their mother's life in safe seclusion appropriate to the circumstance, and with the full benefit of healthful exercise and routine, while she would have spent the days in devout prayer for the dying. Very soon, however, the gossip of the neighbourhood reached her. Girdlestone's extraordinary diligence in furbishing up the house and grounds at North Hay proved to her that, frightened by having lost the girls, made desperate by their mother's condition, his renewed search would literally leave no stone

untuned. Her daughter-in-law, recognising the pure gold of her nature, had confided in her completely, and if the little lady's conscience alone acted in causing her to desire to save the jewels for Helios, all her natural emotions provoked her to snatch them from Girdlestone. She had always been in the habit of treating the girls as companions, trusting them perfectly. Like a true American, she knew no other method of domestic government than by gaining the consent of the children. Feeling that she must go back to London to inform her daughter of the danger, and entreat her permission to secure the jewels and put them in my uncle's care, she told the girls the whereabouts of the treasure, and to whom it belonged, explaining that the wicked man whom they all hated was trying to find and steal it. Life is as we see it—it is all in the eye. That wild life of exhilarating danger which we should expect to lead on a lonely Mexican cattle farm they discerned at every turn in our steady old civilisation. The girls consented to their grandmother's departure, albeit with a thrill of terror at being left alone.

Knowing that it would only be on a favourable day that she could see the patient, their grandmother bid them not be alarmed if she did not return at once. She wrote a long letter of explanation, which, should any emergency arise, they were to present to Helios, and departed.

When we look back upon it now, it is hard to believe that during the early days of the year, when we must have been seeing them daily at work with others in the field across the river, we were living

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such humdrum lives, while to them every moment and hour enhanced the romantic interest of the whole locality.

At this juncture the two novices apprenticed at the Dairy Farm fell out with its mistress, and were brought back to the convent by the pitying Portuguese. Stern discipline bade them return. They became hysterical with terror. The Southern girls filled with compassion, hastily conceived a determination of their own, and offered the gold coins their grandmother had left them to be allowed to take the place. I am inclined to believe the nuns were glad to be rid of the young creatures, whose quick impulses and free bearing were so strange to them. As for the girls, to get on to our side of the river, where the jewels whose hiding-place they alone knew were interred, to be able to secure them, if necessary, and keep them safe till their grandmother's return, was a prospect too attractive to be resisted. Armed only with a sealed letter to Helios, dressed only in nun-like clothes, they bravely undertook to work out the engagement that the first unhappy apprentices had left unfulfilled.

The skeleton of these facts about the girls and their grandmother was in the detective's note-book. He knew nothing of the jewels, and, what was much more important, he did not know where the grandmother now was. He had thought to find her very easily, because he had the address of her London bank from old Rodriguez; but at the bank nothing had been heard from her since she had called there on the afternoon of the day she arrived in town.

The little Mexican lady had apparently fallen, like a fine, bright needle, into the London haystack. The detective had already a sheaf of negative telegrams from hotels and hospitals, which he read off with precision. He had found no clue.

We were much concerned. Lawless was afraid that Girdlestone had in some way got hold of her; but Helios thought that absurd. Indeed, his mind was more than occupied with the curious fears and curious boldness which had possessed the girls. These eccentricities troubled him very much. I was more interested in considering whether what the man in the boat had told Mrs. Prince might refer to the Spanish grandmother.

Helios objected that the story was nonsensical, that the man had only been bent on delaying Mrs. Prince, that what he had said about the girls being safe was a mere coincidence.

Nevertheless I told the story, and I had Mrs. Prince in to tell it, which she did in the same words as at first, having little imagination.

"What did he say the little one's hands were full of?" asked the American keenly; for as yet he had not heard of the jewels.

Mrs. Prince was full of importance, for she was rearranging half the house to make ready for the girls who were still safeguarded by the rectory Feather.

"I have told you, sir, at the request of Mr. Alexis, what the man in the boat said. I can't speak plainer. But as to attaching any sense to his words, I could not, except in so far as they came true—as, for

example, with regard to the safety of our young ladies, and the mother's care they did receive."

The prancing of her head having begun, and the elegance of her accent increasing every moment, knew that the effect of her story, as at first simply told, would be discounted by her airs and graces, so I fired off several compliments and opened the door in quite a gallant manner. The result was what I wished—she went out again.

I said: "It looks as if that man in the boat knew more than Girdlestone knew about the girls, more than we or they knew about Girdlestone, and more than any of us know about the grandmother," cried I.

"And as if he were in the councils of the Almighty about the future," sneered Lawless.

But it is useless to record our conversation about this man, because none of us ever knew who he was, or how he gained his facts or made his inferences. We have had many theories, but no shred of evidence concerning him, although time has confirmed his prescience. I have noticed that the really oddest facts that turn up in life's complexity go unexplained, and in that unfinished aspect may be accepted as marvels, or merely as unfinished incidents, according to the temper of those concerned.

When I dwell on the marvel, my wife says:

"I daresay he was one of those people who see into crystal."

"My dear," I reply, "how could you see the future in crystal?"

To which she says, peaceably ending the matter: "I don't see how you could see the future out of a

crystal." Or she says: "He must have been a detective like ours, and have followed us all about with a note-book."

"Who could have paid him? Men can't afford to do that sort of thing without pay."

"You make trouble out of so little," she cries. "As you don't know who he was, how can you tell who paid him?"

But this is out of place, and I go back to the time when we were all bewilderment about the girls and the lost grandmother.

Of course every possible inquiry about Madame Rodriguez had been set on foot, and the American sent up to town.

I will here explain the long mystery of the Spanish jewels. They had first been found accidentally by Mrs. Roy, buried above the coffin of their original owner. Their dead owner could not have placed them there; no one had ever searched there; but there they were. This grave lay paled about in the open churchyard, surrounded by the village. The iron palisade was high and massive, the interior choked with roses and briars.

The grave was as safe a place as might be found in the kingdom. It could not be opened legally except in the presence of the family lawyer; illegal entrance would have been difficult, as half the windows of the village overlooked it; and, moreover, being subject to the lawyer's inspection, it was the last place that an illegal possessor would have chosen to hide them in. Mrs. Roy, armed with Carp's order, had the palings opened, and when her-

self replanting the grave with fresh rose-trees and sweet-brier, she chanced on the box, and, after examination, replaced it where it had lain so long.

The day after the funeral Helios was about to make his first visit to his new daughters. I thought he was too intent on getting an explanation of their conduct that would set it in a reasonable light to realise his surprising honours.

"It's odd, my liege," said I.

"Yes; they certainly did several things which appear peculiar, but we must not judge till we hear their version of their story." I could see that he was on the magisterial bench.

"I was going to say it was odd to come suddenly on a concealed treasure of grown-up daughters," said I. "It isn't every man would know how to behave in such an emergency; and although, my liege, I flatter myself, as you belong to our family and have had the advantage of my society so long, that you will not do much amiss, yet it would be safer to take me with you, as I have a fine taste in the conduct of domestic scenes."

Helios regarded me with a look half-absent, half-disturbed. He was inclined at the moment to admit that he might blunder, though he had not thought about himself before.

It was intolerable that he should not smile. I began again:

"As you gave Lady High Feather leave to order frocks to the half of your kingdom, you will need to say that the frocks are pretty. You would never have thought of that if I had not. It also occurs to

me that you should inquire whether they like the muslins of their rooms tied with blue or pink ribbons. Some such introductory babbling will go further toward getting a coherent account of their actions than the most reasonable catechism."

"If they can give their minds to such matters when waiting in hope and fear for tidings of a relative—"

"Don't call her a 'relative' to them," I cried earnestly. "The word is sufficient to curdle anything thicker than water, and falling upon their frightened and innocent heart—"

"Don't mix your metaphors, Alice; but if you like, come along."

That was all that I wanted, and I went with him, gloating on our good luck until the rectory was near, and then I became shy, wished myself at home, and remembered how foolishly I had behaved whenever I had seen Theresa. I would have run away had it not been for the shame of it. And there was Helios, perfectly composed, although he had a principal part to play—but indeed, he might well feel self-confident, as he was the handsomest man I ever saw.

There they were, sitting demurely on either side of Lady High Feather, and we sitting on stiff chairs, and the rector manœuvring about the room in the effort to get his wife out of it; but he could not attract her attention.

Anna was very beautiful. All the Girdlestone beauty was hers, with a darker hue from her father's foreign blood and the fire of the Southern sun. She

was, as we afterwards knew, very shy and timid, and in the last few weeks had suffered more than Theresa because she was older and understood their dangers more clearly. We know now that, like her mother, she was sweet-tempered, loving, and modest; but the timidity which rendered her at times almost incapable of speech also produced in her an obstinate desire to remain silent, which was hard to wile away.

It was to her more particularly that Helios addressed himself, and evoked no response but a flicker of red in the cheek and a hanging head.

"I should so much like to know why you did not come to me directly, as soon as you began to be alarmed?"

There was no answer at all till Theresa burst out:

"It was all my fault—not Anna's. And we came to you just the first minute; but granny had told us never to go into a ranch-house where we didn't know the ladies, and you had none, so we didn't come in, but left the letter."

In her excitement, this explanation was evidently clear to her. She sat, at one moment bravely open-eyed, ready to defend her sister, and at another quivering with tears.

"What was your fault? What was it Anna didn't do?" asked the rector gently, giving Helios a cue.

"I went and got the horrid box; for, you see, the Portuguese said *he* had been prowling round at the church at night. Anna said I might be put in prison, but it just made me feel right-down mean sick to think of him getting them after all."

"Who was at the church at night?"

"That man they say is our uncle—so we mustn't call him a beast, but he is. Anna and I saw him exceed with the bottle on the ship."

Lady High Feather shuddered visibly, but she did not relax her affectionate grasp on either girl. I felt sure that in her heart she was saying: "according to their lights."

The rector explained to Helios that Theresa spoke Spanish with propriety; her English was the English of old Rodriguez and his men.

"When the Portuguese told you that Mr. Girdlestone had been about the church, you were afraid he might find the box your mother had hidden?"

"Ye-s-s," she wailed. Then suddenly: "But I wanted an excuse to get it myself, and to see what they were like. It was the sin of loving vain things; and I am punished, because granny is lost."

If, like a Greek chorus, we had all chanted at this point: "To err is human," the result would have been similar to the various incongruous remarks that we did make. But Theresa was much too determined in her excited confession to pay attention.

"Anna didn't know. She wouldn't agree, so I went when she was asleep. You see, there had been a season of rain till the ground was soppy; and the Portuguese got a crow sharpened at the end—the blacksmith did it. So I thought the good saints were making it easy, especially when, at night, there was an awful fog. So I poked and poked with the crow and found it; and poked and

levered it up. I didn't think it was wicked till next day. It's always the day after that makes things seem so hateful. Anna fainted and said you would put me in jail. She was real sick. And then, when she'd forgiven me, we were so dreadfully, dreadfully frightened every minute that the farm-woman would find it. We put the box in one place and the things in another, but she might have looked anywhere. The jail in the town we lived in was the meanest place I ever saw; I don't think it ever was cleaned at all. But Anna was so sweet; she said she would be imprisoned with me if that was what you did. So we brought them to you that very night—the time we lost one of the pearls. And just as we were going in at the gate, Anna remembered what granny said about only visiting where there were ladies. But the Portuguese, who was taking care of us, said there was a mother—"that nice boy's mother, the Portuguese thought she was. But the boy opened the door, and he said there wasn't any lady, and he ran after us; but the Portuguese showed us where to go and to hide. Then we gave him the letter, and he went back and put it in the house. Then we thought you would come to see us at the farm, and we could tell you. But when the Portuguese found what sort of things we had got out of the box—for we had to send him to look for the pearl we had dropped—he entreated us not to tell. He said you would put him in prison too—for he helped to find them, only he didn't know what we had found till we lost the pearl. And he kept hanging round your windows, and,

when you saw him, just saying he wanted work; but what we wanted was to see if you had found the pearl, and he saw where you kept things; and we made friends with the dogs. But we counted on you coming to see us; and when you didn't, we knew you didn't care a bit for our mother, or anything dear granny said. Oh!" She paused. Her determined repentance again gave place to anger. "Oh, if I were a man, I wouldn't be that sort!"

Helios laughed a little, and so did the rector and his wife. The tension relaxed. Theresa was not the sort of girl who turns huffy at being laughed at. She was much in earnest, and only took the laughter as a signal of good-nature.

"I never got the letter," said Helios, "and we can only hope that your friend, the Portuguese, will tell us where to find it, and that it may contain some explanation of your grandmother's prolonged absence."

"Granny only read bits of it to us, for she said we were not old enough to understand it; but granny always wrote beautifully. When you had despised the letter we were just naturally angry, and we determined to give you the old pearls and things without letting you know that we had had them. But that boy saw me bring them"—she again looked at me—"and when you didn't come after us, we just kept on hoping that he had the spunk not to tell. But I wouldn't have asked him not to tell—that would have been low down."

Helios rose, saying that we must go at once and find the letter. He stood a minute looking down kindly at the girls.

"You know you should have come in the next morning and made sure that I had the letter. Wasn't there something in your hearts, at the bottom of all these fears and panics, that told you that you ought to come in broad daylight, and tell everything that had happened?"

Theresa looked straight up to him earnestly.

"Are you right-down sober sure you didn't get the letter? I think you have it."

There was a curious silence in the room. Even Lady High Feather had no gesture or glance suitable to the occasion.

"It's awfully easy for you to *say* that you didn't get it now," continued Theresa earnestly, "and the nicest thing you could do all round, perhaps. It's what Grandpa Rodriguez would do, and he's an awfully nice man. But really good women, like granny, don't fib, and neither do I. I told you that we knew you had the letter—the Portuguese saw you with it; and we couldn't come to confess about the box after he said that if we did you'd put him into prison too, for he didn't deserve it. Grandpa Rodriguez shot a negro once because he stole, although Anna and I cried and cried and begged him not to; he did, all the same."

Helios only said:

"I will go now, and look up this fellow who had the letter."

He turned to me, but I suggested that he would go quicker without me. I had been very much put out a little while before by being pointed at and

called "that boy"; but I forgot that now as well as all the shyness that I had felt.

When he had gone I spoke straight at Theresa. "Look at me!" I said.

So she looked.

I had an odd feeling that it would take years to teach her through her mind certain differences of local standards, but that she could learn enough for our purpose very quickly through her heart.

"I hoped you would come and live with us, and be my sisters," I said. "I was very glad, for I am often lonely. I wanted you to help me in the garden with the flowers, and to ride the colt, and to read the stories I write; but now I can never speak to you again. I can never even look at you and Anna again. I could not have anything to do with you. I am awfully sorry, because I wanted sisters so much."

She looked and looked, and so did Anna.

"I should think you would want us," said Theresa reproachfully. Then she burst out: "I can dig in a flower-bed beautifully, and Anna can make all sorts of cakes for you. Why do you say we can't come?"

The rector and Lady High Feather began to explain to her the notion that a gentleman's honour might not be disputed.

Then I told her what sort of a man Helios was. For aught I know, old Rodriguez, with a different emphasis or different virtues, may have been, in his own way, among those who shall come from the east and the west and take precedence in heaven of the majority of men who have lived in a kingdom

where righteousness is made easy ; but it was my place to paint the portrait of Helios in such colour that these girls must love and honour him once for all.

The rector disturbed me rather by bowing every now and then, and murmuring, "Quite true;" and Lady High Feather gave my lecture an almost embarrassing attention—she, too, had something to learn. But I didn't care; my blood was up for Helios, and I was determined that if these girls came to our house, they should understand the privilege of his society, and if they could not do that they should go back to Mexico.

When I had done, Lady High Feather began : "So you see, my dears—"

But I had risen and was getting to the door. I heard Theresa interrupt her by observing mournfully :

"He's going away!"

The rector came with me to the outer door, and put his head back and laughed, but I only pretended to laugh.

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CHAPTER XXIX

PORTUGUESE POETRY

THE Portuguese was sent for, and we waited. Till within a few weeks ago he had been in the habit of spending most of his time at the public-house; now he was again frequenting that place. He was no drunkard; it was a refuge to him. For some four weeks he had haunted our garden instead, and we now felt sure that this interval covered the time that he had felt uneasy concerning the girls and their strange possessions.

"I wonder," said Helios, "whether the rascal shows up in a better or worse light than when we thought him innocent of anything but desire to escape from a shrewish wife. It is evident that he has been spying on us, but also that he has been a faithful servant and watch-dog to the girls."

Hudson brought him in almost by the scuff of the neck, for he was evidently frightened. He had to be soothed like a child before it was any use to ask him questions; so I talked about the work he might do in the garden, and Helios inquired whether he wished his wife to continue tenant of the farm, or leave it at
DICE.

At this, which was intended to be delicate flattery he scented danger. We could understand, so he said, how easy it would be to him to say that he had no wish that she should go on making him a farm servant; but if he said that, our honours would tell her, and lo! he would be starved and beaten. But he had more wisdom, thanks to the saints! so let our honours understand that he desired that that woman, whom he had unfortunately married, should continue at the farm. But whatever evil purpose we might have against him, the saints knew, and the holy sisters knew, and the young, holy ladies knew, that he would not harm a fly or take what was not his own.

Here Helios came down with such hearty and substantial thanks for his faithful service to the young ladies, that he was put off his defence. At the same time Helios observed that it was not desirable that it should be known abroad that the young ladies had been at the farm. Here something substantial was again given, this time as argument. "Holy Joseph!" he cried, and again: "Holy Joseph!"

He stood looking at the gold coins in his hand with that unalloyed pleasure that it is seldom possible to give to a human being, but often possible to give to a tame animal—the delight that looks neither forward nor back, that feels neither hope nor fear, but overflows—a heart brimful of present satisfaction. The man's big, innocent, pathetic eyes became luminous with joy.

I do not know why St. Joseph should have been

particularly invoked, but in the next few minutes he was called upon several times to witness to the gratitude of the recipient of so many and such large pieces of gold.

As to the letter—ah, yes! he had been upon the point of speaking of the letter. The young, holy ladies had given it to him. " ", in answer to a question—yes, he knew the ladies of whom it was his privilege to speak did not wear the veil; that which they wore was as a plaything, perhaps. But should not the gentle and beautiful, when so young and good, be to all men as if the veil of the Holy Mother of God was held over them by the angels? He was only a sailor—yes, and he knew different kinds of women, truly—but, for his part, that was how he thought about ladies who were very young.

We steered him back to the letter, but we were not unmoved by the native poetry of his heart and his unfeigned reverence. We at last succeeded in finding out that the letter had been given to him in the dark, just as the girls escaped that first night from the garden; and he had been told to take it back and put it under the door—so the young mistress whom he honoured had told him. But behold! he could not leave them many moments; he must catch up with them again; and, moreover, under our door there was not where the blade of a knife might slide; most of all, before he had reached the house, our honours had issued thence with a lantern, so he flew—it was needful to fly like the wind—and caught up with the young, holy ladies, and showed them where to crouch down in the

common. But he had not at once told them he had not left the letter, but took them home. His wife—thanks be to the saints!—went to sleep every night very soon and very sound, rising—might she be forgiven!—long before day. And the next morning he had come to our honours' house at the hour of the breakfast; and behold! there was the large dog among the trees. For his part, he always trusted a dog, especially a large dog, in preference to a man. He tied the letter most carefully to his collar as he stood in the bushes. Then he bade him go in, and waited till he saw him walk in at the front door. What could he have done better? How was it possible that so large a letter, and with a clear writing on it, should go astray? Further, he had lingered and looked in at the windows, and later he had seen that the letter was read. How could he know it to be the same letter? Holy Joseph! No; he could not be sure. But was it not most likely? He had ventured to tell his young ladies it was so, to prevent them shedding tears, and if it was not so, what could the large dog called Master have done with the letter so securely tied?

This question, like many others, was easy to ask. As far as we knew the ways of the household and of the dog, the method of delivery had been safe enough. When we called Mrs. Prince and the men, they were all willing to admit that the first of them that saw the dog would have taken the letter to the master, but none of them had ever seen any paper attached to the dog's collar.

"There is just one person in the world, sir," said

Evana, "that could have taken it off the mastiff, excepting ourselves, an' that's Terry; and if Terry got it, there wouldn't be much left."

He went out, and returned in a minute with Master and Terry, bringing them up seriously before Helios, evidently with some vague notion that they might answer for themselves.

But Helios and I had thought of a more practical form of inquiry, so we went to look in the mutual kennel, a handsome dog-house in which our dogs did not live, either night or day, but in which they kept their bones, uneaten biscuits, etc.; where the mastiff kept the toy he loved best—an old bit of carpet rolled up with a bit of rope; and Terry deposited newspapers given him from time to time in the same tight form. Hudson was supposed to clean it out every week, putting back legitimate canine properties; but for his reputation I regret to say that things many weeks old were found there, and among them a torn envelope in whose bits folds of foreign paper were still to be discovered; only a few disconnected half-sentences, in neat copperplate writing could be decyphered.

That evening the rector came over to bring two letters for Helios, and took back with him the dog story and an apology from the Portuguese.

The girls had each written to Helios. Anna's letter was full of appropriate sentiments well expressed and painstakingly written in an unformed hand. But we thought we detected the advice of Lady High Feather in every sentence, which robbed it of interest.

The Spanish Dowry

No such suspicion, however, could have been felt with regard to Theresa's note. She had, perhaps, hidden somewhere, and written it in complete privacy. The writing was blotted, the spelling original, but I forgot the shock of this in the contents :

"HONNERED SIR,—I beg that you will forgive me for not knowing how very good you are till that boy told us. I never would have thought of myself that a man could be so good, because since we went to the ranch we have only known one very good person, and that was grandmother, who is a woman, and I am very, very sorry I gave you an insult. They have been explaining it to me, and they said if we had lived a few years ago, and I had been a man, we should have had to shoot at one another, which would be just as cerius as Grandpa Rodriguez shooting the nigger. But I hope you will forgive me instead, because I am awfully sorry for you now, and I like the lame boy so much. He's pure spunk. I am sorry I did not explane to you why I put the bundel of things in your safe. It was because Anna and the Portugese said we must not leave them in any place where servants could steal them, and I wanted to have time to get away before you found them, so that you would not know it was us. And the Portugese watched and watched till one night the door was open and you were out. I went in and looked for a place that would be safe, but there was none I could open; and then I thought I might bury them in one of the glass houses, so I went in, but then I herd the boy and was frightened, and

Anna said that would not have been a good plan anyway. And the Portuguese saw you open the green safe with the key of your watch-chain, and Anna took on so and got so sick that one night I did not care whether I died in the attempt or not, I was just determined to put them in your old safe, and I expected next morning to find my hare grey but it was not. This is just to show you how much I suffered, for I feel that I have sinned very deeply, only I shall be much obliged if you will not think it is grandmother's fault, for she is a lady, and Anna says I would never use such bad language if granny had ever learned how to talk American really well, for she talks French and Spanish like a book. Honored sir, there is nothing more to say, unless you can see your way to make friends with me again.

"THERESA.

"P.S.—Tell the boy we believe all that he said, although he put it on rather thick."

CHAPTER XXX

FOUND—A GRANDMOTHER

I DO not know how long it would have taken us Englishmen to find the lost grandmother: the American wrote a full report of her next day.

The tale, as he gathered it later, was this: Madame Rodriguez, knowing that she might have to call more than once before her dying daughter-in-law was able to see her, took lodging in a small house in the nearest London suburb. With her exaggerated idea of Girdlestone's power, and supposing he was seeking her everywhere, she had deposited in the bank any papers she had that would prove her identity.

With the easy cosmopolitan manners which her life had taught her, and with real goodness of heart, she had endeared herself at once to her landlady, a Cornish widow who was struggling to support her children. An accident occurred, the youngest child, running out, stumbled almost under the feet of a horse in the street, and Madame Rodriguez ran nimbly and saved its life at her own expense, for she fell against the wheel, her head

badly injured. She was taken into the house unconscious, and the young widow, in her gratitude, obtained the best local medical aid and nursed her lodger with devotion. She had an aptitude for nursing and for affection, but little knowledge of the world. When consciousness at last returned, and the doctor said that recovery would depend upon peace of mind, she felt no compunction whatever in answering every question of the distressed sufferer in whatever way appeared to give satisfaction.

I should be sorry to have to reckon up how many pretty fictions this warm-hearted and pious woman must have indulged in ; suffice it to say that for five weeks the patient's life hung in the balance, and during that time, in which she was not allowed to sit up or see anyone but her nurse, Madame Rodriguez had been made to believe that her grand-daughters were safe and well, and knew of her whereabouts and condition ; in fact, the widow proved quite an artist, and invented loving messages of the most soothing sort, giving afterwards the triumphant excuse that, whoever or wherever the grand-daughters might be, the greatest evil that could befall them would be the loss of such a grandmother. It is only fair to note that the good woman had no means of ascertaining anything about them except by questioning the old lady, which was to be avoided.

This was the state of affairs when the American agent, whose instinct for discoveries must have been inherited from Columbus, found her. Even then he

was not allowed by the zealous nurse to see her, and it was not until Helios himself went to town that she was able to have the course of affairs explained to her. That, at her age, she recovered was undoubtedly due, not only to the healthy outdoor life she had always lived, but also to the grateful widow's unhesitating deceptions.

While Helios was gone up to town for the day we continued festive preparations for the homecoming of the girls. I arranged with Evans to attend assiduously to the sitting-room fire, bringing in the coals as they were wanted, because, after much thought, I had decided that the best place to force some lily-of-the-valley plants into flower was the coal-box—a very nice iron arrangement that opened sideways toward the fire, and, as I had discovered by the thermometer, retained a fairly uniform heat in its interior.

If Evans did not object to this arrangement I saw no reason why Helios should, especially as he liked the smell of lilies-of-the-valley in the house better than I did. He knew very well that the hot pipes in the glass house made it far too hot for everything else if used for forcing. Yet, on the morning of his return, when, talking to Lawless and holding the tongs, he opened the coal-box and found an inch of hot water and several flower-pots standing therein, he said things that were not amiable. He asked me if I was still using a silver spoon for the slug poison; and whether I still preferred the kitchen tea-pot for pouring petroleum into ant-hills. I said it wasn't a tea-pot in use, but an old one; and he replied that

the coal-box wasn't in use either, although it showed no signs of age.

I mention this just to show that Helios was returning to his former natural and pleasing self. He and I appeared at such times to be of radically different constitution of mind; and now, so many years after, when I write this, one of the most curious things that has happened is that mere time, which in itself does not seem to be precisely an argument, has changed my opinions in respect to household furniture so far that I have much greater sympathy with his.

Even in the matter of the front wall, about which it will be remembered that we had so early a quarrel, I have actually found myself at times regretting that the abundant roots of the wallflower were producing such sure disintegration; but at the moment of which I now write I had no regret, but gloried in the harmony of the rich, brown flowers with the hides of the cows and the russet sails.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE SUNSHINE OF HELIOS

WE brought them home.

I am sure the missel-thrush understood something of the matter. As for the terrier and the mastiff, it was obvious from their behaviour that, having been in the secret all along, their joy was tempered with condescension for our stupidity. They went about saying quite frankly: "Yes; but of course your pleasure is less mature than ours because you did not know what you had to expect."

As for me, I had only one anxiety, and that was that my daffodils and jonquils, which were thick as grass and in bud in our lower copses and grassy spaces, should open their sunny hearts upon that day. It all depended upon the way the angels arranged the heavens. All through the night the air was mild and still, and if only the sun rose unclouded the green tassels would turn to gold. I kept waking up to see if the stars sparkled, and felt deep disappointment when, about five o'clock, I found the sea and the river had sent up vapours which obscured them

all and were descending in soft rain. It is true that John Quill laughed at me through the half light and greeted the grey dawn with his accustomed hilarity; but I went to sleep in dudgeon, to awake, an hour after sunrise, to the first foretaste of summer.

The sun had the field; the wet earth was warm with his distant fires. The song of the first larks was tossed upon us from all sides over the common, and John Quill had at last succeeded in producing a lovely stave of soft whistles which till to-day he had practised without much apparent success. He could now perform these notes so perfectly that he entirely discarded for the nonce his "Quack, quack, quack," and was prepared to cast the grace of his most exquisite accomplishment upon the occasion.

I did not need to go out and look at the daffys; I knew perfectly well that my greed for gold would be satisfied. Nor was I disappointed, for they were busy all that day arranging their gilt petticoats to the best advantage. The bronze pansies also produced their delicate illumination very plentifully, and the wallflowers raised tufts of their best cow-like colourings out of the chinks and edges of my broken wall. The red cattle were browsing, of course; the dune was green as a meadow. The boats were out on a sparkling sea, foam-fringed; their brown and yellow sails burned like amber and red jasper.

We all went to fetch them—I mean Helios and the dogs, Hudson and the pair, the carriage and I.

Mrs. Prince, Evans, John Quill, and the flowers stayed at home to make ready. The filly had grown as like the mare as one pea is to another, and they drew the carriage to the Rectory door with such fancy steps that it was evident they knew it to be a new one.

So we brought the girls home, and the daffodils and Mrs. Prince and John Quill did the welcoming very prettily.

As soon as possible after this Madame Rodriguez was brought to Lone End for her convalescence. When she came to us, her gentle and sincere grief for a daughter-in-law whom she had learned to respect and love, endeared her greatly to Helios. They had long talks about the future of the girls. The rectitude of her character was shown in the fact that, in obedience to their father's injunction, she had not urged the girls to make their first communion in the Roman Church. She never expressed any complaint at parting with them, saying that their young sorrow in the matter was hard enough without any real appreciation of her maturer power of grief; nor would she consider for an instant their proposal that they should take turns in living with her during her lifetime. It had been their mother's strongest and most unalterable wish, since she had discovered they were alive, that they should not be separated, and that at her death they should be put into my uncle's charge for the few remaining years of their minority.

The relief of Helios at finding there was something he could still do for his wife to make up for

what he had left undone was so obvious that it was not possible even for the little Spanish lady, who was very clever at saying what other people could not say, to dwell much on the goodness of his determined adoption of the girls. As for me, it was not until I was many years older that it ever occurred to me that the part he played was other than that of the joyous recipient of the most rare and beautiful gifts.

The dear little grandmother, who seemed to have spent all her life taking one and another homeless person to her heart and providing for them, now surpassed herself in an original effort to do even greater things in her age than she might have dared in her youth—for indeed, there is nothing that requires practice to make it perfect so much as the art of personal benevolence. She triumphantly took the poor Cornish widow and all her children to the ample acres of the Rodriguez ranch, explaining with unstrained simplicity that, while her husband could do without her no longer, she was yet too feeble to travel without a nurse on the voyage, and at home she would need the widow and all her children to run her errands. Old Rodriguez, she said, would miss the girls so much that he would need a houseful of children to amuse him.

We found much entertainment in outfitting this unexpected multitude. Helios and Theresa went to see them set sail; and so charmed was Helios to the last with the crisp little ladybird manners of the Spaniard, that he rashly promised that we too would

all set sail some day for a flying visit to the land of plenty.

My chief concern in the matter was that Theresa cried herself to sleep every night for a week; but after that, as it was spring, and all the seedlets had to be pricked out, she allowed herself to be consoled by the sweet influences of the season and cheerful companionship.

Two other things greatly helped toward the cheering of my adopted sisters. The first was a wedding. How could two perfectly human girls resist the fascination of a trousseau and a wedding and in our very house too? It was no less an affair than the nuptials of the great Mrs. Prince and our man, Evans, and Helios and I had many private hilarious hours over the separate confidences made to us by the happy pair—the high-minded condemnation of the lady, and the humble-minded self-glory of the successful lover. But on the whole they were both of them much nicer than in earlier years, and nicer still after the step was decided upon. Helios merely insisted that the wedding should take place at once. The girls, with earnest interest, superintended the buying and making of the bonnets and gowns, and became great cronies of Mrs. Prince in the process.

They were naturally anxious to convey all the details of this courtship, trousseau, and marriage to their grandmother. This brings me to the second circumstance which tended to their domestic contentment. I had discovered that, among all their

beautiful housewifely and outdoor accomplishments, writing was not included. Theresa wept with her fist in her eye when she confessed that she always inked her fingers and blotted the paper, and that Anna's head ached whenever she sat down to a desk. I became scribe to their dictation, and the letters that we wrote to the grandmother as long as she lived would, though I say it that shouldn't, make a fascinating volume, for they sparkled with wit and were replete with descriptions of men and nature which made up in romance what they lacked in accuracy.

To these letters I must refer my readers if they wish to know more of Lady High Feather, the unhappy Portuguese, the pearls which Helios gave to the maic'ens, the duke who finally purchased the rest of the Girdlestone jewels, and the perfectly ridiculous way in which Captain Oldham, who had bought North Hay, made a fool of himself about Anna—how he, a middle-aged man, grovelled at her feet until one day he had a fall from his horse and broke several bones; how Anna, who had never so much as lifted an eyelash to look at him before, suddenly discovered that she was willing to marry him. Also, in these letters there is, I believe, a partial account of how one day I found that I was in love with Theresa, and how, with great nobility and chivalrous restraint, I kept this a secret for about ten days, and then discovered that Theresa had known of my fatal passion a much longer period, and had decided, with her usual

benevolent enterprise, that I had no reason for despair.

I will, however, make no further suggestions as to the contents of the family letters.

THE END

reason for

tions as to